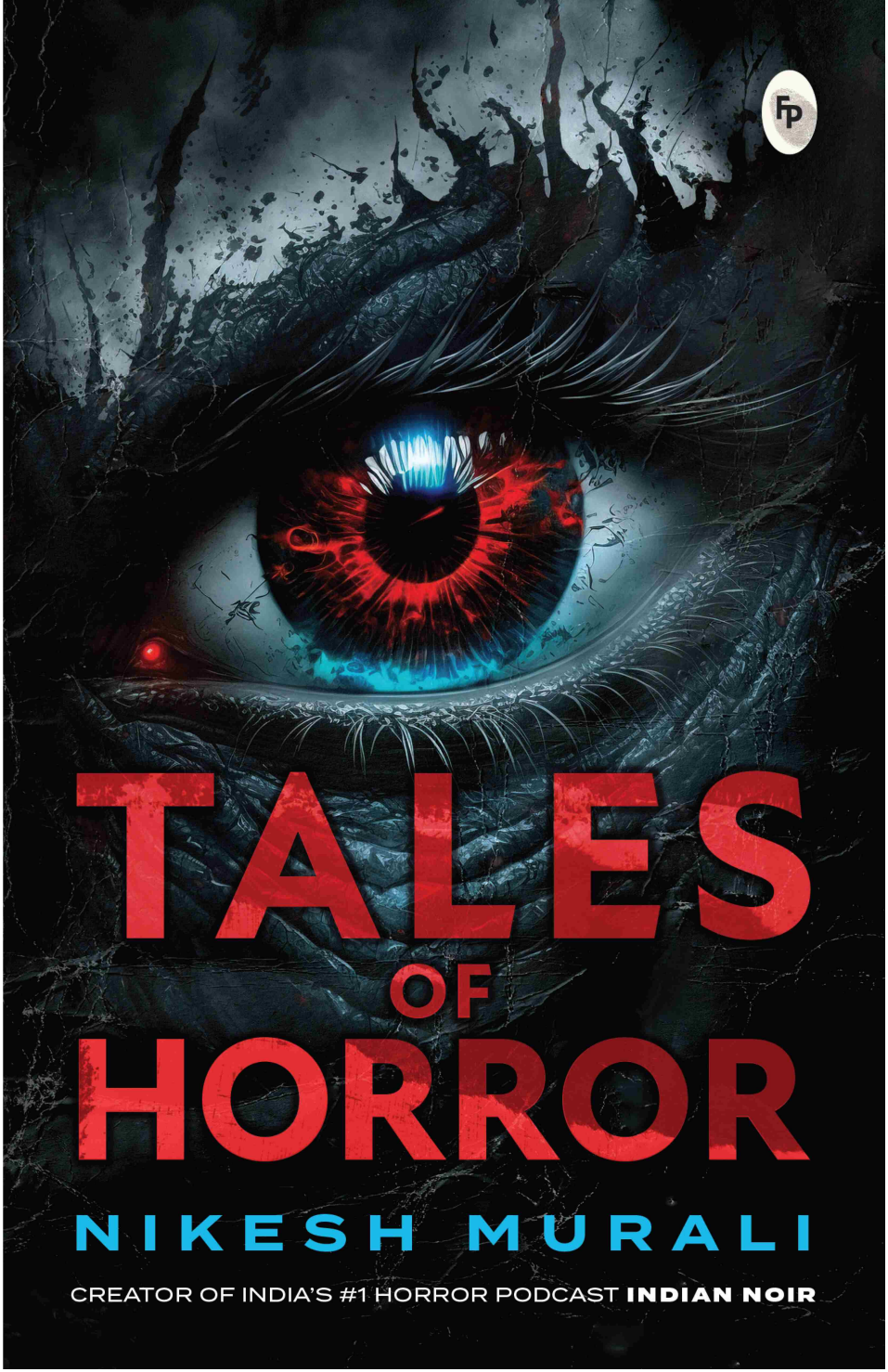
TALES
OF
HORROR
NIKESH MURALI
CREATOR OF INDIA'S #1 HORROR PODCAST INDIAN NOIR

TALES OF HORROR

NIKESH MURALI

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Dedication

To
J and E

When age fell upon the world, and wonder went out of the minds of men; when grey cities reared to smoky skies tall towers grim and ugly, in whose shadow none might dream of the sun or of spring's flowering meads; when learning stripped earth of her mantle of beauty, and poets sang no more save of twisted phantoms seen with bleared and inward-looking eyes; when these things had come to pass, and childish hopes had gone away forever, there was a man who travelled out of life on a quest into the spaces whither the world's dreams had fled.

H. P. Lovecraft

Author's Note

Dear Reader,

What you've got in your hands is the result of a 24-year-long grind. A kid, desperate to break free from a shitshow at home, found solace among the towering shelves of the Eloor library in Thiruvananthapuram, clutching Stephen King books like lifelines. He dreamt of seeing his own tales of terror in print one day.

And now it's here. In your hands.

You bought and read this book, and for that, I'm so grateful.

Allow me to share some background to demonstrate why your support is so monumental and why it holds such significance for me.

Despite winning awards for my poetry and short fiction, I found myself in the ridiculous situation of being unable to get my crime novel *His Night Begins* published 20 years ago. No connections or clout meant the manuscript rotted on my damn desk.

I had abandoned my hope of ever getting published, but I continued to write simply because I revelled in the art of storytelling.

Then, my verse readings on Twitter blew up, racking up millions of views, and I started getting voice-acting gigs for poetry videos and audio dramas.

Light bulb moment. I dusted off that old manuscript and narrated the story of a vengeful hitman on a podcast I called 'Indian Noir'.

Well, you know what they say—the rest is history.

Indian Noir Podcast has been featured in *Harper's Bazaar, India Today, CBC, The Hindu, Times of India, New Indian Express, Hindustan Times, Deccan Herald, The Statesman, The Week, The Telegraph, Femina, The Economic Times, Mid-Day, The News Minute, The Quint, India Times, ABC Radio, Mashable, Reader's Digest India, Men's World, Your Story, Calcutta Times, Grazia,* and other media outlets. It has won rave reviews on major podcasting platforms, from critics and listeners alike, and is widely

considered one of India's best horror and crime podcasts.

The media coverage and fan love opened doors. *Indian Noir* became a Spotify exclusive for a period of time. I was among the top creative talents from India (including Karan Johar, Anil Kapoor, Farhan Akhtar, Anurag Kashyap, Tabu, and Nawazuddin Siddiqui) selected to create original shows for *Audible Suno* when they launched in India.

The praise and recognition came pouring in. Suddenly, I had direct access to movie producers and streaming platforms. The voice-acting legend, Amitabh Bachchan, even mentioned my name on the show *Kaun Banega Crorepati*.

I'm grateful as hell for all of it.

It's given me the chance to share my twisted visions of a ruthless universe where helpless humans are at the mercy of its icy tentacles and monstrous jaws.

And best of all? I get to combat the toxic positivity and nauseating, sugar-coated garbage that fills up social media feeds.

Horror fans are a resilient bunch. You've probably encountered research suggesting that scary tales can aid in developing valuable coping mechanisms that come in handy during real-life challenges.

For me, horror has been a lifesaver. It's empowered me to persevere and conquer obstacles in my path.

Folks are hooked on *Indian Noir* for the same reason. Because it's a badass boot camp for the soul. Think of it as a nightmare factory, cranking out horror after horror to toughen up even the frailest of hearts. Don't expect any quick fixes or bullshit 60-day six-pack promises on the podcast. Instead, prepare for an intense, gut-wrenching plunge into the darkest corners of your being, forcing you to confront the shadow side of your soul, which you've been avoiding all along. It compels you to confront liminal spaces where the numinous and the sinister coexist.

Now, I'm unleashing the terror in print. Expect longer stories that either don't fit the podcast format or just work better on the page to keep haunting India's bookshelves, starting with this spine-chilling anthology.

Within these pages, brace yourself for print-only scary tales fuelled by Indian mythology, global horror influences, and India's own ghost-ridden locales.

As I mentioned earlier, there's a tonne of research connecting morbid curiosity with increased resilience. So go ahead, take a seat, and delve into my twisted imaginings. Sure, you'll encounter nightmares, but

you'll also uncover profound truths that'll brace you for the terrors yet to come.

Once again. Thank you. Your support means so much to me as an artist and a human being.

Also. What's that behind you?

Nikesh Murali

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I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude to the following individuals and organisations who have played an instrumental role in the creation of this book:

Shantanu Duttagupta, Publisher at Fingerprint, for believing in the potential of this project and providing unwavering support throughout its journey. Gavin Morris, Art Director at Fingerprint, for his exceptional creativity and vision in designing the captivating artwork that brings this book to life. Shilpa Mohan, Editor at Fingerprint, for her meticulous attention to detail, which has enhanced the quality of the final manuscript.

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I would also like to acknowledge the media outlets that have recognized and praised *Indian Noir*, including *Harper's Bazaar, India Today, CBC, The Hindu, Times of India, New Indian Express, Hindustan Times, Deccan Herald, The Statesman, The Week, The Telegraph, Femina, The Economic Times, Mid-Day, The News Minute, The Quint, India Times, ABC Radio, Mashable, Reader's Digest India, Men's World, Your Story, Calcutta Times, Grazia*, and many others. Your recognition and promotion have contributed significantly to the success of *Indian Noir*, and I am truly grateful for your support.

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I am immensely grateful to my English language teachers and lecturers from school and university, particularly Ms Jaya.

A heartfelt thank you to Dr Mohan for the cherished memory of *vidyarambham*, for holding my tiny fingers, and guiding me to write HARI SHREE GANAPATHAYE NAMAHA. Your love and blessings continue to inspire me.

Last but not least, my deepest appreciation goes to my family. Without your love, support, and understanding, none of this would have been possible.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge the literary masters who have influenced and inspired me, such as King, Lovecraft, Machen, Blackwood, and McCarthy. Your magical words and worlds of infinite terror have shaped my artistic journey, and I offer my humble respects. *Guruve Namaha*.

With heartfelt gratitude,
Nikesh

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About the Author

AYA

Chapter 1

Seeing the woman he once called Aya at his doorstep begging for a job shocked Vishal to his the core.

The 35-year-old IT professional hadn't seen her in decades.

She had left his parent's home, days before the horrifying incident that shattered his life.

She had aged well, considering it had been 25 years since that wretched night. She should have been in her 70s, but Aya looked like she was still in her 50s.

Her sour face featured clusters of skin tags. Her sunken, pathos filled eyes nestled in dark recesses. Her dark lips always looked parched, like she was in a permanent state of dehydration, and they were pursed in anguish as if parting them would lead to her soul being sucked out of her body. Her knotted hair, which was grey in patches, made her head look like an unkempt bird's nest. Her nostrils twitched and flared as she engaged in an anxious breathing pattern. Although her general appearance and her hunched posture made her look like a weakling, there was a swiftness to her gait and a quiet strength to her form. Vishal did not doubt that she was more than capable of handling housework.

And it so happened that their maid, who was away visiting her ailing mother, never returned. He and his wife were drowning in housework on top of their busy day jobs. Vishal recalled Aya being excellent at maintaining his childhood home, especially when his mother became ill with an unknown ailment that left her exhausted and despondent. No medical expert could nail the reason for her deteriorating condition. Aya's love and affection were a constant source of solace in those

difficult times.

He had so many questions for her, though. Did she have an inkling of the tragedy that was about to unfold in their home? Where did she disappear to? Where had she been all these years?

Even if she answered all these questions, he wondered if it was prudent to let her into his household.

Her presence would be a daily reminder of what had happened.

Not that he didn't think of that night at all.

Chapter 2

Vishal was 10 years old and living with his parents in the Civil Engineer's Quarters just outside of Belgaum.

He was sent to bed early that night after a huge row between his parents. He couldn't remember the exact details, but his mother was upset that his father had forced Aya to leave their home.

"You are not quite right in the head, and that woman has something to do with it," his father had roared over his mother's hysteric crying.

Things had not been great between his parents in the last year or so. Shouting matches had become a daily ritual in their home. The discordant atmosphere filled Vishal with great sadness.

Aya had been with them for a year and was an island of comfort for his tender soul. But now she was gone.

He hugged his pillow tight, consoled his heavy heart with kind words, and slowly drifted into sleep.

Chopping sounds from the kitchen woke him up in the middle of the night.

He jumped off his bed quietly, opened the bedroom door, and tiptoed to the kitchen to investigate the unusual sounds.

The hacking sounds were usually reserved for Saturdays, when his father brought buffalo meat from the farmer's markets.

A quick glance at the clock told Vishal it was 1 a.m. He took a deep breath and peeked in.

His mother was cutting up a sizeable chunk of meat on the large kitchen island bench.

She was crunching the meat cleaver into a leg—a human leg.

Meat cubes were arranged in neat piles on the leftmost edge of the bench.

Then his eyes fell on the crimson pool on the floor, on which rested the bloodied upper torso of his father. His head was cleaved clean from his neck and rested atop his unmoving chest.

His eyes were half open, and his tongue stuck out comically, as if he was poking fun at the whole situation.

A scream built up in Vishal's throat, and his heart was a furious drumbeat in his chest. But the impulse to howl was quashed when he saw what was hovering over his mother's head.

The thing was attached to one corner of the ceiling.

By the grace of God, he was unable to recall the features of that malign entity after that horrendous night. Over the years, he had tried to conjure that vision, but he always drew a blank.

He remembered running to his neighbour's doorstep. He remembered the police arriving. He also remembered being told that his mother had killed herself after butchering his father. But he couldn't recall the face of the monster that presided over the act of violence that left him an orphan.

Maybe having Aya around him might jog his memory and help him see the thing that his mind so badly wanted him to forget.

This was an opportunity to get answers to the questions that had haunted him all these years.

Chapter 3

Vishal's 28-year-old wife, Usha, lay panting beside him, her sweaty fingers intertwined with his. They watched the ceiling fan as they relived the pleasure they had just experienced in each other's arms.

Two years into their marriage, they were still passionate about each other.

They had met at a yoga retreat in Dehradun—two souls looking for solace in an ancient practise. Instead, they found their source of healing in each other as they sipped masala tea in front of a campfire. They knew from their initial interactions at the camp that they were made for each other. Their love could be a salve for their childhood traumas. A brief attempt at a long-distance relationship culminated in their wedding at the hill station that had brought them together.

"I am going to get some water. Did you want anything?" She asked him, as she got dressed.

"Some water, please," he requested with a smile. His gaze lingered on Usha's half exposed breasts. He drank in her full figure and her sensuous lips, and let out a satisfied sigh.

Now that Aya was looking after the housework, they had more time to enjoy each other's company. A lot of busy professionals like them led such disconnected lives because all they did was sit in front of a computer and do household chores before sleeping for a few hours, only to repeat the same cycle day in and day out. In a month, their new housemaid had transformed their lives for the better.

Usha returned with a glass of water and closed the door behind her.

She had a puzzled look on her face.

“What happened?” Vishal asked.

“I think Aya was loitering in front of our bedroom door when we were doing the deed,” she said.

“What?” Vishal asked.

“I saw her slink away to the kitchen when I opened the door,” Usha said.

“No way,” Vishal said, sitting up.

“She is a bit creepy, so I am not the least bit surprised,” Usha said.

“Why do you say that?” Vishal asked.

“Come on, don’t tell me you haven’t noticed. Her mannerisms. The way she looks,” Usha said.

“She is a poor old lady who is not blessed with great features, and she is moody, but that’s not being creepy,” Vishal said in defence of his childhood nanny.

“Was she any different when you were a kid?” Usha said.

“Obviously younger. But her personality was the same, I think,” Vishal said.

“Did you ask her about what happened to your parents?” Usha enquired.

“She was reluctant to speak about it. I can imagine it was painful for her too. All she said was that my mother was probably mentally ill, and my father didn’t know how to help her. He blamed Aya for the issues between them and fired her. She read about the tragedy in the papers. She moved around the country working as a housemaid. Her turning up at our doorstep was pure coincidence,” Vishal said.

“I’m sorry, darling,” Usha said, stroking her husband’s shoulder.

“Talking about Aya’s creepiness, there was this one time, and by the way, this is a bit scary, so I am half expecting you to wake up screaming tonight,” Vishal said.

Usha huddled closer. “You are probably right, but do tell me.”

Vishal gave her a questioning look and then nodded and continued, “I woke up thirsty on a boiling summer night. It was past midnight. There was a dim night light in the living room that helped me find my way to the fridge. Just as I laid my hands on the door handle, I saw something from the corner of my right eye.”

Usha tightened her grip on Vishal’s hand.

“There was a figure in the darkness that looked very similar to Aya. Only her eyes seemed to be unnaturally wide, like that monster from the urban myth we read about in the papers. It’s some kind of internet trend. What’s it called?”

“Like Momo?” Usha offered.

“Yes, like that wretched thing. And its hair was stretched out to the sides, forming a halo around its terrifying head,” Vishal said.

Usha shivered at the description.

“I flung open the fridge door, and light spilled out of its cold interior,” Vishal said.

“And?” Usha enquired.

“The room was brighter thanks to the new source of illumination. And it revealed nothing but an empty corner where that thing previously stood, leering at me,” Vishal said.

“Oof, what a relief,” Usha said.

“No, wait,” said Vishal.

“What, there is more?” Usha said, looking shocked.

“I saw that the kitchen door was open, and the light was on. Shadows bounced about the room, as if moths were fluttering against a bright bulb,” Vishal said.

“Please tell me you fled to your room,” Usha said.

“I don’t know what possessed me. I decided to investigate,” Vishal said. “I prowled towards the door and peered inside.”

Usha detached from him and climbed under the covers.

“And there was. . .” Vishal paused for dramatic effect.

Usha squealed.

“. . .Aya sleeping on her straw mat like a baby,” Vishal said with a mischievous smile.

Usha emerged from the safety offered by the blankets and slapped Vishal on his arm several times.

“So this is a made-up story,” she said disappointedly.

“No. It happened. But I wanted you to hear it because I don’t think Aya is slinking around the house listening to your moans of pleasure,” Vishal explained.

“But the kitchen door wasn’t open, and the light in the room wasn’t on when you first approached the fridge,” Usha said.

“What?” Vishal said, looking a bit confused.

“In the story. How could you have missed that detail?” Usha demanded.

“Err. I don’t know. It was a long time ago. Anyway, I don’t know why I tell you creepy stories, Miss Scaredy Cat. It will just keep you awake all night long, and I will suffer along with you,” Vishal said.

“Not this time,” Usha said, before poking her tongue at her husband.

“So you say,” Vishal said, rolling his eyes.

Chapter 4

The creature clung to a corner of the ceiling, with the aid of the fleshy suction pads in its hands and feet and observed the sleeping couple.

It loved studying pathetic human antics—the interplay of thought, emotion, and action—things that were alien to its own nature. It had done so for centuries, and it never got tired.

After all, it was important to appreciate the building blocks of the human soul—that most delightful delicacy.

Its stomach rumbled as an ancient hunger gnawed at its core.

It had heard them fornicate noisily. For a moment, jealousy took root in its heart. The feeling was stillborn. It blossomed and withered in a matter of seconds.

O, the things the creature had given up for greater joys.

Sure there was a pang of sorrow for what was lost, but there was a greater desire for consuming the soul fires that blazed in the living world.

It climbed down the wall like a lizard and studied the facial features of its prey. It observed the rapid eye movements beneath their eyelids.

Although both husband and wife were in the clutches of a nightmare it had willed into existence, the woman looked like she was about to escape its paralysing grip.

As expected, Usha woke up screaming, and the sound pulled the husband up and out of the abyss of night terrors.

He took her in his arms and consoled her.

How sweet the assurances he whispered in her ears, to calm her

down.

The wife had spoken about it in disparaging terms. It would make her see the error of her ways.

The husband, the child who was in its care decades ago, still harboured affection. How beautiful. That would make the consumption of his life essence more pleasurable.

It looked on with its lidless eyes as the two humans decided to go back to sleep.

There was lots to do before it sank its proboscis into them. It would show them the painful truths that lived in the shadow realm. It would teach them despair.

When Usha and Vishal went back to sleep, it detached from its perch. Its humanoid form exited the room like an octopus clambering through a coral forest.

Chapter 5

Meeting colleague and close friend, said to flash, as Abhay sipped coffee in Vishal's planted courtyard of their IT firm.

Vishal massaged his sleepy eyes, which were ringed by dark circles, as he nodded and sighed. "We have been having difficulties sleeping. Nightmares and such," he said.

"We?" Abhay asked in surprise.

"Yes. Usha has been suffering too," Vishal said.

"Sorry to be nosy, but are you having marital problems? Mental or physical health issues? My ex and I had a tough time in our relationship when we were trying to conceive," Abhay said.

"There are no financial issues. Work is good. We have been to the doctors about it. We even have a maid who looks after all our household chores, freeing up lots of time in the evening to relax. So, I can't think of a reason for us to be stressed," Vishal said.

"The maid. This is the one from your childhood you have told me about?" Abhay enquired. Abhay was the only person at work who knew about Vishal's traumatic past.

"Yes. She has been very helpful. It took a while for Usha to warm up to her, but now they are like buddies. Aya even feeds her breakfast some mornings," Vishal said, smiling for the first time in the conversation.

"Hmm," Abhay said with a concerned look on his face. He turned his gaze towards two mynahs dipping their beaks in the fountain.

"What is it? You know you can tell me anything? You have earned that right as my bosom buddy. Tell me?" Vishal encouraged him.

“This maid. Do you trust her? I read this article about a servant who was slowly poisoning her owners. They lost their minds thanks to the hallucinogenic properties of the toxin and handed over tonnes of money to their abuser. Then she disappeared, leaving her masters dead in their bed,” Abhay said.

“No. Come on. Aya wouldn’t do that,” Vishal said incredulously.

“I am just raising my concerns,” Abhay said. “Did the police ever question her about her involvement in your parent’s deaths?”

“No. There was no need for it. She had left days before the tragedy, and I, of all the people in the world, know that it was my mother who committed the crime before. . .”, Vishal let his words trail off.

He never saw his mother after running away from the kitchen, where she was hacking his father to shreds. No one told him how she had taken her own life in that dreadful abattoir. He hadn’t bothered to find out.

There was a jackfruit tree covered in creepers on the northernmost border of his maternal grandfather’s orchard, where her ashes were buried in a clay pot covered with a red cloth. He refused to even go near the tree after her cremation.

“I am stumped, bud. I don’t have any theories left,” Abhay said, raising both hands in a gesture of defeat.

“How did you say the servant was poisoning the owners?” Vishal asked.

“She was adding some chemical—I can’t remember its name—to their breakfast,” he said.

“Funny you say that. My father always believed Aya had something to do with my mother going crazy. They had this fight once about why he refused to eat the food Aya cooked. He told my mother, what the hell has that woman been feeding you, for you to lose your mind like this? I am not eating that shit,” Vishal said.

“It’s a line of enquiry worth pursuing,” Abhay added with a stern face.

“But to what end?” Vishal said, still struggling with the idea. “Aya can’t steal our valuables that are in the bank locker, and I don’t see us writing blank cheques for her to cash in. No. Aya took nothing for our home when she left the first time. The police confirmed that,” Vishal said dismissively.

“Let’s dig a bit more and see if there is anything to be worried about,” Abhay said.

Chapter 6

Eating a spoonful of *gulab jamun* made Usha's mouth
"Say, that is one of your favorite sweets. I made it especially for you," Aya
"No. One is enough. It's really tasty. I had a big lunch with Ma, and we had gulab jamuns for dessert," Usha said.

Usha had taken a day off in the middle of the work week to spend some time with her mother. They shopped and ate at the new local mall in Vasant Kunj.

She needed the break.

The horrors that had robbed her and Vishal's sleep were taking a toll on her mental health. That even the sleeping pills prescribed by their family doctor couldn't aid in a restful night's sleep made her feel helpless and depressed.

Her mother had noticed her poor physical state.

"Look at the dark circles under your eyes. You are all skin and bones, darling," she had remarked.

When Usha explained the situation with the dreams, her mother offered theories that she had heard a million times before.

"Yes, we have even been to a psychiatrist," Usha said, looking exasperated.

"It is time both of you had a child. This might be God's way of telling you to get on with it," her mother said.

"Stop! I don't want to talk about this anymore," Usha said sternly, drawing the attention of other patrons seated around them in the food court.

"I am just concerned about. . ." her mother began saying.

“Maybe that’s the issue. We are constantly beating ourselves up over this situation and can’t think of anything other than the miserable nights we endure in our bedroom,” Usha said.

Her mother sighed loudly.

“I just wanted to come and spend some time with you today, so I didn’t have to think about my terrible dreams,” she said.

She attempted to forget the horrid images, but the gulab jamun on her plate reminded her of the eyes that followed her around in the nightmare-scape.

The setting was always the same. Night-time. An empty house. A faint light source of unknown origin faintly illuminating its emptiness. Constant hacking sounds rang out from somewhere deeper in the structure.

The sensation of being watched as she moved through the building towards the din. It didn’t matter how far she explored the house, she could never reach her destination. The racket receded farther, the closer she got to it.

Then mucilaginous, red-veined eyeballs trailing crimson veins emerged from walls and chased her like tadpoles swimming in the air.

The eyeballs multiplied like bacteria, as they emerged from every inch of the wall and ceiling. They swarmed like locusts as they chased her screaming form through the rooms and corridors of the funeral home, and just before they pounced on her, Usha would wake up screaming in the waking world.

Her mother had asked her to detail her night terrors, but she didn’t elaborate.

Usha regretted not being forthright with her mother as she ate one more mouthful from Aya. She should have been more patient with her. She had felt safer in her protective mother’s presence.

“One more. Last one,” Aya pleaded, and Usha opened her mouth reluctantly.

Chapter 7

Aya's dessert gave Usha a bad stomach. She attempted to relieve herself of the discomfort in the toilet in vain. She shed her clothes from the morning trip with her mother and took a long shower, hoping to wash away her worries and ease her physical discomfort.

Usha was drying herself when she noticed the shadow play at the bottom of the door.

She ignored it and turned her attention to the mirror. She ran a hand over her bloated belly and wondered what it would be like to be pregnant with Vishal's child.

A smile blossomed on her lips. Maybe her mother was right. Maybe all this psychic discomfort came from a sense of being incomplete.

The thought of making Vishal happy with the revelation played through her mind like a blissful breeze on a summer's day.

A chittering sound came from the other side of the door.

"Is that you, Aya?" she asked.

The noise played again as if in response to her query—hundreds of bones grinding together as the body it inhabited morphed into something infernal. She imagined a vicious python making such a racket while trying to accommodate a giant prey in its gut.

Usha approached the door with a concerned look on her face.

She bent down and looked through the keyhole.

Nothing. Just a restricted view of the dining room.

Abruptly, an ancient, milky eye furrowed with yellow veins slid into view, scaring Usha out of her wits.

But even as she tried to flinch away from that horrid sight, her body refused to budge. It involuntarily inched her closer to the keyhole, forcing her to press her open eye into the metallic surface.

A cackle erupted from the opposite side.

The baleful eye moved up, and the creature's wretched mouth, filled with ancient rotting teeth and bordered by grey, parched lips, came into view.

It was the satisfied smile of a hunter who had felled its quarry with ease.

Usha tried to scream, but all she produced was a pathetic croak.

The awful eye returned and continued its fell inspection.

"What is this thing?" Her fearful mind questioned.

She knew the answer. The clues were there all along. But no sane mind could accept the existence of such a monstrosity in the real world. No leap of logic could define the genesis and nature of such an aberration.

Filthy brown worms squirmed out of its eyes and lengthened and wiggled through the hole before pressing into Usha's exposed iris.

The scream she had held back finally erupted, but it was a soundless expulsion of air from a mouth twisted in agony.

Her mind had been weakened by frightening dreams and her body had been softened with toxins. So readied, the malicious maggots burrowed into her brain with ease and took control of her.

The cackling grew louder as the puppet master rejoiced in the sensation offered by the strings weighing down the psychic bar that controlled its victim's movements.

Chapter 8

"You shouldn't see the sight of this dear wife, down," Vishal said. He was shocked at the weight loss. She looked like she had been wandering in the desert without water for days.

Usha was in a stupor, and her eyes were fixed on a blank wall in their living room. She managed a weak smile after several minutes of Vishal asking about her well-being.

"What happened, Aya?" He asked the servant, who was lurking nearby.

"She's been like this ever since she came back from her trip with her mother this morning," Aya said.

"You didn't think of calling me?" Vishal said angrily.

"I. . . " Aya started, forming an excuse.

"Get me some water," Vishal demanded.

"I gave her lots of water, and she even ate my halwa," Aya said.

"I don't care. Get me some water," he said bluntly.

As Aya sulked towards the kitchen, Vishal guided his frail wife to the bedroom.

"Rest up. Let me have a think about the next steps," Vishal said.

Aya turned up with a glass of water.

"Keep an eye on her," he said to Aya, who looked hurt from his previous outburst towards her.

Vishal grabbed a cigarette as he exited the room and entered the balcony, which overlooked a busy arterial road.

He lit the stick and drew in a big lungful of nicotine.

The sickly visage of his wife and the conversation with Abhay played

on his mind.

“No. This has to be something medical. I will have to take her to the hospital,” he muttered to himself.

“Beta, you shouldn’t be smoking. Not good for your health,” Aya’s voice startled him. She was standing right behind him.

“Shit,” he said. “I didn’t hear you coming.”

“Not good for you, Vishal,” Aya said, trying to grab the cigarette.

“You are not my mother,” Vishal said, flinching away. “I don’t need you to lecture me on my vices.”

Aya looked stunned for a second before retreating.

“That was odd,” he thought.

Vishal briefly watched her slink away before raising his phone to his ear to call a taxi.

It was time to take his wife to the hospital.

Chapter 9

A myriad of tests performed on Usha over two days revealed nothing unusual. The perplexed doctors suggested an IV drip and a few days under observation in one of the general wards.

Mental health interventions were suggested, much to the displeasure of Vishal.

“There is nothing wrong with her. There is nothing wrong with either of us,” he protested.

It was clear from the tests that Usha was not being poisoned by Aya, as Abhay had theorised.

Vishal felt bad about getting stroppy at Aya.

Usha’s mother arrived to relieve him of his bystander duties. She ordered Vishal to head back home for some well-earned rest.

Bags of IV constantly dripped saline-electrolytes, and vitamins into Usha’s veins, and it was having a positive impact on her condition. The colour had returned to her cheeks, her lethargy was waning, and she seemed to be more alert during conversations.

“Running your own health to the ground will not do Usha any favours,” his mother-in-law advised him.

It killed him to leave Usha on the sick bed, but he knew the older woman was right.

When he got home, he had a long shower and requested dinner.

Aya, who was still sulking about his outburst, was quiet as she served him dal, rice, and fish fry.

“This is tasty,” he said to her after eating a few mouthfuls.

She did not respond.

“I am sorry about the other day,” he said.

“There is nothing to say sorry for,” she said in a mousy voice.

“There is. I was rude towards you. It’s all the stress from. . .” he began saying.

“I said there is no need to apologise,” Aya said firmly.

“Okay,” Vishal said, turning his attention to his dinner.

His eyes fell on the giant millipede moving across the bed of rice. Its black segmented body glistened with mucus, and it was covered in bristles crowned with drops of green pus. Hundreds of legs waved up and down in unison, as if it was at the helm of a malign instrument, playing an unearthly tune that humans couldn’t perceive.

Vishal screamed and pushed his dinner away.

Aya came running to his side. “What happened, beta?”

“There. On the rice,” he said, pointing a shaky finger at it.

“What? There’s nothing there,” Aya said after inspecting the plate.

Vishal drew the plate towards him and scoured through its contents, looking for the arthropod, in vain. He had clearly imagined the entire episode.

“I have lost my appetite,” Vishal said.

“At least drink the lassi. Please,” Aya said.

He obliged.

“I am hallucinating. I need to have a long rest,” Vishal said, getting up from the chair and heading towards the washbasin.

“Yes, you do,” Aya said.

She grinned evilly as she gathered the plates.

Chapter 10

The fact that it couldn't turn invisible did not disadvantage the creature. Such was the blinkered vision of humanity that they ignored the poor, who pattered on the sidelines of life. Those empowered to embrace greed ran their rat race, and everyone in the peripheral vision was but a blur.

The creature slipped past the guard at the main gate, climbed the grand staircase, and slipped into the general ward. There it traversed from shadow to shadow till it reached its destination. The few that spotted its fleeting figure assumed it was another bystander in a hurry.

Usha was asleep on her bed, and her mother was getting some shuteye on a nearby chair.

It slid underneath the bed to stay out of the sight of the nurses on their rounds.

It shivered in satisfaction at the success of its night mission. It imagined Vishal sleeping at home soundly, freed from its spell-craft that conjured foul nightmares.

It had sunk its fangs into its primary victim—the wife. Now came the envenomation of her shuddering, helpless form.

It whispered in a tone that was not audible to the others. Only Usha's mind could detect and accept its poisonous urgings.

Chapter 11

"Well, I am glad I was wrong," Abhay said in a disappointed tone that belied the fact. He sat across from Vishal in the living room, rubbing his hands together, looking worried.

Vishal nodded. "That makes two of us."

"But I am still not ready to discount my theory that. . ." Abhay paused as he glanced at the kitchen, where Aya was washing dishes.

He continued, ". . . a certain person doesn't have something to do with the strange occurrences in this household."

Abhay pulled a folder out of his leather satchel and placed it on the coffee table in front of Vishal.

"Have you heard of yakshini or succubus, as they call them in the west?" Abhay spoke in a low voice.

"Not this nonsense again," Vishal said with an exasperated look.

"All I am asking of you is to read through it and reflect on what happened to your family and what is happening now to your wife," Abhay pleaded. "Indulge me, please."

Vishal sighed and shook his head.

"The medical tests may have proven nothing, but I think there is someone who can help you get to the bottom of this mystery," Abhay said.

"Who?" Vishal asked bluntly.

"I know a registered hypnotist, who also dabbles in parapsychology," Abhay said.

"And what is this nutcase going to do, ha?" It was Vishal's turn to

look at the kitchen. They could hear brushing sounds, the rattle of utensils, and the splashing of water in the sink. “Forcibly hypnotise the said person and record their confession on a tape?”

“Nope. He will hypnotise you. Because I believe the key to this mystery lies in your memories of the night your parents died,” Abhay said.

“What?” Vishal said incredulously.

“Remember how you told me that something was watching both you and your mother? You told me that, to this day, you can’t remember what that thing looked like. I believe. . .” Abhay said.

“Stop. You have outdone yourself, mate,” Vishal interrupted his best friend.

Abhay threw his hands in the air.

Vishal looked at his watch and said, “It’s time to bring my wife home from the hospital. You coming?”

Abhay nodded enthusiastically and added, “Promise me you will give the material a read.”

“Alright,” Vishal said unconvincingly.

Chapter 12

When Vishal and Abhay left for the hospital, Aya entered the bedroom and opened the top drawer of the large oak cabinet.

She pulled out Abhay's folder and laid it on the bed with a sense of reverence, before flipping through its contents. Newspaper cuttings and print outs from web journals detailing the history and myths surrounding yakshinis or succubi—mythical beings that fed on the vitality of human forms for sustenance. The illustrations on the pages showed voluptuous female forms oozing sensuality, biting into the flesh of muscular men and nubile women with their fanged mouths.

Aya checked out herself in the mirror and laughed in derision.

Yakshinis—servants of male deities and consorts of mythical creatures that had phalluses. Reviled as beings not worthy of being elevated to the pantheon.

Aya scoffed at this characterisation, no doubt the fabrication of a patriarchal society.

She deposited the file back in the drawer with a great sense of disappointment. Such a load of nonsense.

The verbal diarrhoea in the pages had only captured an iota of the truth. For the human language could not adequately explain the primal desire for survival that was birthed along with the first stars and galaxies.

It was here long before religions took shape in the minds of men and women. It was the consumer of light. It was the first predator to see beyond the appeals of the flesh, to appreciate that which powered biological machines of incredible complexity—soul-fire.

It was the ultimate survivor in pursuit of the ultimate thrill. Its hunt just so happened to also sate its hunger.

The chief trait of any creation that valued survival was its ability to detect and eliminate dangers that threatened its very existence. Peril had taken on the form of Abhay in this instance.

Aya's laughter filled the empty home, as she thanked the creator for making her quest even sweeter. Something light to feed on as she awaited the eventual feast.

Chapter 13

Usha recovered well. The house bore witness to her smiles again. She rarely slipped into a stupor, which saw her staring at blank walls for extended periods. She was eating normally, and she seemed in better spirits.

While the pace of her recovery pleased Vishal to no end, he was still concerned about the lingering horrors in their household.

His mother had suffered similar afflictions in the final year of her life. Was his wife's ailment somehow linked to the events of the past?

Also, the terrifying nightmares continued to haunt both of them. They were not as frequent as before, and they were now intermingled with beautiful dreams. These pleasant visions offered the promise of eternal bliss in a perfumed garden nestled in the innards of a divine being's womb.

This Eden was a swathe of colourful flowers in the midst of a grove, where birds sang sweet songs and the susurration of leaves caressed by the wind created a state of idyll that was intoxicating. There was no sky above, just a veined, translucent membrane of flesh that expanded and contracted as it let in the pink warmth of a distant sun.

The vision was concurrently weird and comforting. It was loathsome and delicious. It was eternal contentment couched in a package that was truly alien to human sensibilities. And it was way more enticing than the night terrors that saw shrieking eyeballs chasing the husband and wife through a tormented landscape.

Chapter 14

Abhay turned up at the house regularly with flowers, fruits, and his own brand of jokes. He entertained Usha with funny office anecdotes and shared his favourite viral videos.

He also encouraged Vishal to explore the hypnotherapy session with the paranormal researcher. His secretive entreaties did not go unnoticed by Aya. It didn't matter that he lowered his voice as he aired his suspicions about her. Aya heard every word that spilled forth from his poisonous tongue.

One afternoon, Abhay and Vishal were engaged in a serious discussion in front of the garage. Aya and Usha observed their agitated forms from the balcony.

"It's time to eliminate this persistent, irritating pest," Aya said.

Usha, who was staring at Abhay intensely, shivered visibly in response to the statement.

"Huh?" Usha enquired.

"You heard me," Aya said.

"Ye. . .yes," Usha said reluctantly.

"A reaping awaits the reaper," Aya said.

The concerned frown on Usha's face transformed into a rictus grin.

Chapter 15

A different nightmare welcomed Vishal tonight.

The night of his parent's death.

The chopping sounds led him to the kitchen, where his mother stooped over the island bench, butchering a chunk of flesh.

His father's carved-up head was on the floor, animated with a hellish glee that made him sick to the core. It greeted Vishal with insulting remarks.

"Here comes tiny dick, Vishal," it said.

Vishal looked away.

"You don't see it, do you?" His mother said without turning to face him.

"What?" Vishal asked, the female form determinedly slicing through gristle.

"Your wife's desire for your friend," she said.

"Abhay? No. He is my best friend," Vishal said.

His father's head directed a derisive laugh at his response.

"Haven't you seen her laugh at his jokes and funny videos," his mother said.

"Shut up," Vishal said angrily. "They are good friends."

"He used to visit her while you were away on interstate trips," the thing that was meant to be his mother said.

The sound of moths fluttering against a light bulb.

"Stop lying," Vishal said.

He glanced back at his father's head and saw him flicking his tongue up and down to mimic the act of cunnilingus.

“She enjoyed it, you know. She moaned louder than she moans for you,” his mother said.

Vishal grabbed a ladle from the begrimed bench and pounced on his mother. He tried to bring it down on her head, roaring, “I will kill you, bitch.”

“You can, after you kill Abhay,” she said.

The blow did not land. His arms were paralysed. They dropped to his sides and hung uselessly.

“Why do you dispute what I say?” His mother said as she slowly turned towards him.

Vishal’s stomach churned in anticipation. He didn’t know if he could bear the sight of what she had become.

“No, no,” Vishal begged.

“You want to know how I died after killing your father, don’t you?” She said, presenting her foul visage for his consideration.

Criss-cross slashes had blinded her and mutilated her face to the extent that Vishal struggled to find any resemblance to his mother.

“Will you kill him?” She said.

“This is a wretched dream feeding me malicious lies,” he said.

The sound of moth wings was several pitches higher now.

“You can’t see the truth,” she said.

“I know my wife and my best friend. You are lying,” Vishal countered.

“You can’t even see what’s in the corner of the ceiling right now,” she said, flashing a set of rotten teeth coated in a crimson film.

Vishal strained every muscle in his body to cast his eyes upon the author of all his pain.

But he couldn’t move. It felt like his neck muscles were straining against a rock.

“You can’t even see what’s in front of you. How would you know about the secret liaisons conducted behind your back?” His mother said.

“Lies! Lies! Shut up!” Vishal screamed.

The flapping of a thousand moth wings became malicious whispers that grew louder.

“She loved it so much, she even took him in her mouth,” the hushed tones goaded him.

His mother and father laughed like maniacs, and their crazed antics tunnelled into his skull with an ear-splitting buzz.

Vishal woke up with a scream. The whispers still lingered in his bedroom.

His wife wasn't next to him.

Vishal panicked and looked around. When he spotted her, his heart still hammered in his chest.

She stood facing the closed bedroom door.

Dread crawled up his back like ants.

He called out to her several times. She did not respond.

"Probably sleepwalking," he thought.

He jumped out of the bed and approached her cautiously.

He peeked over her shoulder and studied her face. Her eyes were closed. Deep worry lines furrowed her forehead. Her lips twitched occasionally, and it was always followed by a faint, almost imperceptible cry.

"What are you doing, darling?" he asked.

He guided her back to the bed and placed her under the covers.

Then he gently opened the bedroom door and peered into the gloom. There was nobody there.

The door to the kitchen where Aya slept was closed.

He grabbed a cigarette from its case and flicked on the living room lights. For the first time in his life, he smoked inside his home.

Vishal pulled out the business card of the psychologist Abhay had recommended from his wallet.

He stared at it for a long time as he drew in big lungfuls of nicotine.

Chapter 16

"Are you comfortable?" Dr. Prakash asked as his middle-aged, bald-headed patient, Vishal, settled into a luxurious leather couch opposite to him.

"Yes," Vishal said.

The wood-panelled consulting room featured tall bookshelves stocked with leather-bound volumes and expensive ceramic artefacts. Wards and runic mandalas safeguarded occult tomes placed in glass displays in the four corners of the room.

"I have an academic interest in occultism," was the only statement Vishal managed to elicit from the learned psychologist when he enquired about the yellowing manuscripts. He was half expecting Prakash to drown him in a sea of supernatural mumbo jumbo. So the hypnotist's reluctance to elaborate further truly surprised Vishal.

Abhay, his faithful friend, was waiting outside for him.

Vishal had finally accepted that unlocking his memory would help solve the mystery behind the nightmares, his wife's deteriorating health, and heal past traumas. But it still did not make the process less daunting.

"I have my suspicions about what is happening to you, but that is all speculation till we can unlock the painful memories buried deep within your subconscious mind," Prakash said.

Vishal nodded.

"Close your eyes," Prakash said.

Vishal did as instructed.

"I am going to count from 100 to 1. Listen to my voice closely. . ."

Prakash kicked off his script.

Vishal embraced the instructions and quietened the restless and stubborn part of his mind that was fighting the process.

The psychologist's calm tone lulled him into a deeper state of awareness.

"Your body is getting heavier as you relax more and more. . ." the script continued.

The fluttering of moths.

Chopping sounds.

Vishal's breath quickened.

"Are you okay?" Prakash enquired, detecting Vishal's physical discomfort.

'Don't go there. Don't. Just don't,' Vishal's mind begged.

"Vishal?" Prakash said.

An intense drumbeat in his chest. Sweaty palms. Vishal squirmed in his chair.

'Once you enter that place of truth, you cannot un-see it—the thing whispering poison in your mother's ears' Vishal's mind pleaded.

"But, my Usha. I need to know," Vishal countered in a wavering voice.

"Calm yourself down. Breathe normally," Prakash instructed.

The hacking sounds, the disturbing wing flaps of moths, and his chattering mind combined to deliver a cocktail of migraines, that threatened to split open Vishal's head.

Vishal sprang into wakefulness with a startled look.

"I. . . don't know if I can do this. I am sorry," he said

"Vishal, take a break. Let's try again in a few minutes," Prakash said.

"No," Vishal shouted as he leapt off the chair and stormed out of the office.

Abhay, who was live-streaming cricket on his phone, caught a fleeting figure in the corner of his eye.

He spun around to find his friend bolting from the premises.

"Hey Vishal. Where are you going? What happened?" he asked, chasing after his best mate.

Vishal did not respond to his hails. He jumped into his car and drove off without a backward glance.

"Vishal," Abhay shouted after the car zooming into the distance.

Chapter 17

Abhay reflected on the events of the past few months as he sat on a bench in his favourite spot at Deer Park. Less frequented by joggers and picnic groups, it was set amidst a lush grove overlooking a babbling creek. The shaded environs that broadcast sweet bird songs had been a source of solace for him since his divorce. This magical oasis and the devotion of his best friend, Vishal, had brought him back from the brink of suicide.

Presently, Abhay was mulling over whether he had pressured Vishal too much to explore his past traumas.

The image of his friend fleeing from the psychologist's office flashed in his mind.

'Shit, I should have given him some personal space. He must have been under such great stress,' Abhay thought. 'Couldn't be easy, reliving all that trauma, no matter the motivation.'

"Abhay," a familiar voice called out to him.

Abhay whirled around in shock. This was the first time a voice had intruded on his reveries in this scared spot.

He was shocked to find Usha waving at him glumly.

She was dressed in a green churidar and her face was makeup free. Her hair was messy, and her puffy eyes gave him the impression that she was in a turbulent, emotional state.

"Usha, what are you doing here? How did you. . .?" he asked

"I will answer your questions later. But now, I need you to come with me," Usha said, before turning and walking hastily towards a block of public toilets not too far from where Abhay sat.

“Where are you going?” Abhay called out to her.

“Just trust me. I have something to show you,” Usha shouted back.

“What’s going on?” a concerned Abhay muttered as he ran after her.

As Abhay pounded after her, he noticed that the area was deserted, as always. What would have once caused him to initiate a pleasurable intake of breath now caused him anxiety.

“How did she get here? How did she know where to find me?” he asked.

His concern for his friend Vishal also extended to his wife. He had known her from their courtship days. It pained him to see her in the present shape. After all, what brother could bear to watch his sister suffer in such a terrible way?

He was curious as to what she was intending to show him, and that too, in the privacy of the rarely used toilet blocks.

Was today going to be a day of revelations?

He had always been quick to blame Aya, but could Usha be the source of the strange occurrences? Or was it something else altogether—something completely left of field?

A million queries bombarded his mind as he entered the public toilets with trepidation.

“Here,” Usha’s voice chimed from the male section.

Abhay took a deep breath as he stepped into the room.

The four urinals and the two toilet cubicles were empty at first glance. A fluorescent tube light flickered above, as tiny moths made kamikaze runs at its hot surface.

Abhay shuddered as his eyes fell on the hundreds of insects mobbing the ceiling. It was an orgy of slick, segmented bodies and wings, churning and buzzing in anticipation.

“Where are you, Usha?” He said, as he conducted a 360-degree scan of his surroundings.

Only the winking light answered him.

“Usha? Stop playing games,” he said nervously.

No response.

Abhay was about to exit the male toilets and check the female section when he heard her voice from the filthy mirror, set above the sole washbasin.

“Usha?” he called out as he approached the mirror.

“Abhay. . . I. . . I” she hesitated. The voice was definitely coming from inside the mirror.

“How is this possible?” A slack-jawed Abhay said.

His hands gripped the sides of the ceramic bowl as he peered into its grimy, reflective surface.

Abhay's logical mind couldn't accept this aberration.

"She is outside, on the other side of the wall," he concluded.

As if to counter his thoughts on the matter, Usha's reflection appeared in the mirror.

She was crying tears of helplessness.

Her sudden appearance startled him. He tried to twist around to face her, but he couldn't move. It was as if his hands were glued to the basin.

"Usha, what's going on?" he enquired in a faltering voice.

"I don't know how to explain it," she said tearfully.

Abhay's heart threatened to leap out of his chest as he tried and failed to yank his hands away.

"You must see it for yourself," she said.

Abhay watched in terror as a figure peeked out from behind Usha.

It wore Aya's uniform—the plain, white sari. But the creature swathed in the cheap fabric was a corruption of her human form. Round, hungry eyes bulged out of the sockets, and yellow veins wiggled like worms on the pale orbs. Parts of its face were a desiccated parchment, while other sections featured skin as smooth as a baby's bottom. Its mouth featured teeth in varying stages of decay or rejuvenation. The rare, wavy, loose strands of hair on its balding scalp behaved like sea kelp swimming in ocean currents.

"You want to know the truth, don't you?" The thing spoke, but its grating voice came out of Usha's lips. "Let me show you."

The drone of insect wings underneath that venomous voice.

Abhay shuddered at the realisation that his beliefs were true beyond his wildest imaginings. Warm piss cascaded down his legs and pooled around his feet.

Cracks appeared in the mirror, partitioning its surface into triangular shards the size of small knives.

As Usha stepped forward in the fissured reflection of the mirror, Aya's evil form followed closely.

The vile thing peeked out again and Abhay discovered that its coal-mouth now featured a proboscis attached to the back of Usha's head. The tubular organ had reduced Usha to a puppet that moved and acted at its whims.

Abhay's howl of terror rang out in the room and disturbed the swarming insects on the ceiling.

Several of them flew into his open mouth and blocked his breathing

passage.

Abhay coughed and dry-retched in response, even as he tried to escape the invisible cuffs that rooted him to the spot.

“It’s not my powers that have imprisoned you, child. It is your fear,” Usha said with an expressionless face. Her statement was underlined by cackles that emerged from behind her.

Usha’s hand shot over Abhay’s right shoulder, and she extracted a shard from the shattered mirror.

Panic seized Abhay’s shaking body as the sharp fragment was wrenched out of its original home.

“I want the tongue that sullied my true intentions,” Usha screeched.

Abhay watched wide-eyed and helpless as his best friend’s wife jammed the improvised weapon into his open mouth, severing his tongue and mauling his gums.

Blood pooled inside his mouth and drowned the moths that had colonised the moist cavity. He swallowed some of the crimson liquid before vomiting copious amounts of it into the sink.

Usha grabbed his hair and tugged his head back with one hand as she drew a red line around his face with the tip of the blade—the first step is skinning his visage.

A croak rang out from the depths of Abhay’s chest, which quickly escalated into a heart-rending howl, as the skin was peeled off his face.

“I need the eyes that have witnessed my true form,” Usha said, as Aya laughed raucously behind her back.

Two quick, squelchy stabs blinded Abhay and transformed his face into a carmine mask.

Usha, dissatisfied with the butchery, gave him a bloody crown by scalping him.Abhay’s body shuddered violently as blood sheeted down from his horrendous wounds. Soon, his traumatised body slumped down to the floor as the life force drained out of him.

Usha threw Abhay’s wet scalp to the floor as the tubular mouthpart that had pumped kill-lust into her soul fell out of the back of her head with a wet plop. The exhausted victim of the possession fell to the floor, weeping.

Aya watched her in dismay.

“It will take greater strength to complete your final mission,” Aya admonished her. “Don’t shrivel like a delicate flower.”

Usha let out a scared yelp.

Aya turned her attention towards the dying Abhay, who was choking on his blood.

“Pathetic,” Aya growled, before lowering herself to the floor and pressing her lips to the back of Abhay’s skull. A wet crunch was followed by a spray of warm blood.

Usha looked away in disgust.

Abhay spent the last few, intensely painful seconds of his life screaming his life out of his lungs.

Chapter 18

A few hours into his afternoon shift, feelings of intense guilt assailed Vishal. He felt terrible about exiting the psychologist's office unceremoniously and shaming his best friend.

His colleagues had informed him that Abhay had opted for the late shift, so he waited at the reception desk of their office complex, hoping to deliver an apology.

Abhay never arrived.

Vishal's calls to him went unanswered.

He drove to Abhay's rented home in Sector 48 and was greeted by a locked front door.

Vishal rang him several times on his way home. There was no response.

He left him a voicemail asking him to call back urgently.

At home, Aya served up a delicious meal of palak-paneer and roti. Usha wolfed it down like someone who hadn't eaten in months.

'He must have been insulted by my antics at the clinic,' he thought, as he ate distractedly.

He abandoned his half-eaten dinner and escaped to the balcony to place more calls to mutual friends and acquaintances. No one had heard from Abhay or seen him.

"Come on bud. Answer my call," Vishal muttered, as he rang Abhay for the umpteenth time.

He watched a rubbish TV serial absentmindedly before turning in for the night, along with his dear wife.

Sleep did not come easy. He tossed and turned, as he imagined

alarming scenarios, including one where Abhay had met with an accident and was bleeding to death on the side of a lonely highway.

'I will go to the police station in the afternoon, if I still don't hear from him,' he made a mental note.

The plan assured his restless mind and tiredness conquered his body.

An hour into his sleep, Usha's vomiting woke Abhay.

"The paneer must have been off," Abhay said, approaching his sick wife, who was spewing into the toilet.

He rubbed her back and checked if there was blood in the bowl.

His breath caught as his eyes fell on what looked like human teeth floating amidst the puke.

Usha turned and caught his gaze. She promptly flushed the toilet's contents.

Vishal tried to make sense of what he had just seen, but his mind explained it away as an optical illusion.

Usha's dishevelled appearance and her teary eyes filled him with pathos.

"What happened, darling?" He asked.

She shook her head as she wept and then pressed her face into his shoulder.

Sobs racked her torso, and Vishal sensed the weight of her grief.

"What are you crying for?" He asked.

"I don't want to talk about it," she said.

"Ok," he said.

As he stroked the top of Usha's head and consoled her, Vishal knew where he needed to go first, before reporting his friend missing.

Chapter 19

Twenty minutes into his hypnotherapy session, Vishal arrived at the tragic and terrifying moment that had completely transformed his life.

“You are now travelling through the deepest recesses of your mind,” Dr Vaidyan said. His voice sounded distant, as if he was shouting from another room.

“I am here, doctor,” Vishal responded. He couldn’t be sure he had audibly muttered those words.

Fear was a child gripping his finger, refusing to let go. It tugged at his heart just as he was about to enter the kitchen, where his mother was butchering his father.

“I have to,” he said, “for my Usha.”

The scene was exactly as he remembered it from the night. His mother at the island bench engaged in her wretched task. His father’s dismembered, still corpse on the floor.

He searched for the thing on the ceiling, which he knew was goading his mother, its words concealed by the clamour of insect wings.

The same resistance he had felt for so long stonewalled his attempts again. It was a hurricane rebuffing his intense desire to witness the truth.

“Fight it. It’s your mind. You are its master. You have the keys to unlock its secrets,” the doctor’s muffled voice said.

Vishal repeated the good doctor’s words like a mantra.

“I can do it!” Vishal said.

As he pushed backed against the dark energies clouding his vison,

fissures sprang into existence with loud cracking sounds and disfigured the simulation of his childhood home's kitchen. His mother was oblivious to the damage as she slammed the cleaver into a cut of thigh meat.

Flakes of paint and plaster powdered down from the ceiling as Vishal gained entrance to a place robbed of light for so long.

His determination wrenched apart the fleshy doors to the frightening secret sealed inside the vaults of his mind.

A distressed baying sound like the death call of a thousand condemned souls resounded through the mindscape that contained the kitchen, even as the lights in the room flickered incessantly.

Vishal's eyes fell on Aya's transmogrified form, which clung to the ceiling like a spider, the front of her body facing the gory sights below.

She moaned as she watched the carnage unfolding below in delight.

Her bulging eyes drooled tears of joy and her lips quivered excitedly. Her hair was a corona of evilness that pulsed with pleasure.

Milky fluids squirted out of her pores and bathed her skin that was a patchwork of necrotic tissue. The ejaculate healed her withering form, restoring youthfulness.

"Yes. Yes. More," she said as an orgasm shuddered through her monstrous form. She opened her filthy, blackened mouth wide and unleashed a repulsive groan of pleasure.

Vishal snapped out of the revelation with an anguished scream that thrust him into the waking world.

Dr Vaidyan rushed to his side and grabbed onto his shoulders.

"Easy Vishal. Easy. Settle down. Calm your breathing, and when you are ready, tell me everything," he said.

Chapter 20

As Vishal raced his hatchback across the city to get to the Durga Mai temple, he replayed the events at Dr Vaidyan's clinic in his mind.

Vishal's post session testimony shocked the good doctor to the core. Dr Vaidyan immediately grabbed an occult history tome from one of the glass showcases and guided Vishal through the horrifying history of yakshinis.

Illustrations of demonic feminine beings resembling Aya's wretched form filled the yellowing pages of the manuscript. The book elaborated on their modus operandi, which involved infiltrating a happy family, sowing poison in the minds of its victims and feeding off their misery with the ultimate aim of restoring their youthful appearance. It took control of a family member like a puppet master and used them as a weapon to enact their dastardly plan.

"It's not just about vanity and the desire for everlasting youth, they genuinely enjoy the thrill of reducing a human soul down to its most sorrowful constituents and feasting on it," the doctor said. "I am afraid the tragedy that took your family will also befall your own household if you don't do as I say. Immediately."

Dr Vaidyan rang the priest at the Durga Mai temple and explained the seriousness of the situation. He requested a sacred thread and the preparation of consecrated unguents to cleanse the malign influence of the yakshini from Usha's ravaged mind and body.

"Grab the sacred ash from the hom kund in the mandapa and spread it around the house. It will help draw out the evil magic ravaging your home," the doctor said to Vishal as he got off the call.

“Doctor, I don’t know how to thank you,” Vishal said with folded hands.

“None of this will work if that cursed woman still lives in your home. You must get rid of her as soon as you get home from the temple. Go now,” he ordered.

Presently, tears welled up in Vishal’s eyes, making the drive hazardous. His traumatic past had been revealed, along with its lethal secrets. The hammer blow of that revelation was exacerbated by the realisation that he brought Aya’s accursed presence in his home and ruined his beautiful wife’s health and sanity.

And what about Abhay? Did Aya have something to do with his absence as well?

He wanted to bash the evil woman’s head in. She was, after all, the suzerain of all the hurt and misery in his life.

Vishal braked hard to avoid an old man on a bicycle, who suddenly crossed the road.

He braked so hard, he slammed onto the steering and a gash opened up on his forehead.

The old man rode away without an apology.

Vishal touched the wound and then examined the blood smear on his palm.

He was certain that a great danger awaited him. He would need every ounce of his strength to fight the maleficent intruder in his home and escape the calamitous fate that befell his parents.

“I will let nothing happen to you, darling,” Vishal said determinedly.

Vishal waved away the small crowd gathered around his car and put his foot down on the accelerator.

Chapter 21

Aya fed Usha lovingly as she sat at the dining table in a stupor. In her mind, Usha was trapped in a twilight forest, drowning in mist. Leafless, gnarled trees petrified her as she tried to navigate a maze of dead shrubs. She couldn't reach the borders of the woods, no matter how hard she tried.

With each spoonful Aya placed in her mouth, the forest grew larger and her escape less likely.

A watcher in the shadows whispered warnings to her and aided her during her escape attempts. The watcher's help was crucial in fleeing a spindly limbed monster with a spider's head, which stalked Usha through the hellscape.

The monster's identity was kept from her in the beginning. Soon, the watcher in the shadows murmured that it was ready to reveal its true name.

In the real world, Aya placed another spoonful of fruit salad laced with her special potion into Usha's mouth as she stared blankly at the wall.

"Your oppressor. It's Vishal, *buddhu*. It's always been your dear husband. The man who imprisoned you in this cursed home, in this diseased body," Aya said with a giggle.

"Vishal," Usha mouthed feebly in a scratchy voice.

"Yes, Vishal. And it's time to liberate yourself," Aya said.

"But I love. . ." Usha began saying.

"Why do you insist on indulging in this useless sentiment, my child? Why? Can't you see he doesn't reciprocate the love? I have told you

many times. His heart belongs to his colleague, Seema," Aya said.

"Seema," Usha repeated.

"I showed you the other day. The two of them walking out of that hotel in South Delhi," Aya said, referring to a false memory she had planted in the possessed woman's mind.

"Cheat," Usha said.

"Yes," Aya encouraged her.

"Tra. . ." Usha muttered.

"He doesn't want you now that you are sick. He knows your womb is rotten. He can smell your barrenness," Aya said, moving closer to Usha's ear.

"Traitor," Usha said.

"Of course, he is. He is like every other man, abandoning his wife at the first sign of trouble," Aya said.

"He must. . . he must. . ." Usha muttered.

"We delivered just punishment to Abhay. Now it is your husband's turn," Aya screeched venomously.

"He must. . ." Usha said, her voice rising.

"Yes, say it, child," Aya said, stroking Usha's head gently like an affectionate mother.

"He must die," Usha declared.

Aya kissed Usha on the lips. Then she said, "I am so proud of what you are about to accomplish."

Chapter 22

Usha, you have so late, Vishal stepped in through the main door.

“Stupid woman, can’t you see I am with my son?” Aya, who was feeding on

“I am not your son. Take your vile hands off my wife,” Vishal roared.

He hustled towards the dining table and placed three packages containing the sacred items prepared by the priest on it.

Aya drew back with a hiss at the sight of the blessed artefacts. Their raw power clawed at her skin.

“Your treacherous stay in this house ends today,” Vishal said as he opened the first package to retrieve the holy thread.

His priority was to secure Usha’s safety. Once she was warded off from the evil machinations of Aya, he would eject the foul being from his beloved home.

Vishal had just removed the black thread from a pouch when Aya fought the painful radiance of the warded items and leapt onto the table on all four like a wild predator.

The lightning-fast move startled Vishal and made him drop the thread.

He bent down and picked it up quickly, only to find sharp nails raking at his face.

Aya’s human form stripped away like a melting candle.

She reared up, squatted on one leg on the table and kicked out with such ferocity, it sent Vishal sprawling backwards onto the floor.

Before he fell back, Vishal reached for the package containing the consecrated ash.

Aya leapt off the table, landed on Vishal and immediately unleashed a frenzied attack. Blows rained down on his head and torso, and sharp nails slashed at his neck and face.

Vishal tried to worm his way out from underneath the wretched creature, even as he hammer fisted her face.

The hallowed thread that was meant to go around Usha's neck was snatched by his attacker, who now resembled an ageing woman with chapped lips and bulging bloodshot eyes. The thinning hair on her scalp wiggled into life and resembled a nest of mating snakes.

The sanctified thread burned a sizzling, crimson line on Aya's hand. She shrieked and flung it away.

Vishal glanced at his catatonic wife, who was in no condition to assist him.

Aya continued to attack with feline viciousness, screeching and wheezing as she lay about him.

Vishal opened the parcel containing the ash from the temple, scooped out half of the powder, and threw it on Aya.

The white powder settled on the creature's skin and frizzled as it ate into its repulsive flesh. It jolted the insides of the ancient being and sent a wave of spasms down its back. The cursed creature dry-retched several times before letting out a roar of pain.

The deployment of the ash blinded Vishal temporarily. He could only see white for several moments. He had to rely on his other senses to tell him that Aya had scurried away in agony, to nurse her wounds.

When he finally blinked the powdery particles away, the dining room was empty. Aya and his dear wife were nowhere to be seen.

"Usha," he cried.

No response.

As he got up to his feet gingerly, Aya screeched in despair from one of the rooms.

"Hope I got you, good bitch," he muttered.

He searched for the holy thread, but couldn't find it.

He clutched the remaining ash in his hands and stalked forwards, calling out his wife's name.

A cry of pain rang out from the left, which ended in a bout of hysterical laughter.

The shudder inducing sensation that had overwhelmed him when Aya had him pinned down marched up his back like ants.

"What are you laughing about?" He asked, scanning every nook and cranny of the living room.

The laughter died down, only to resume almost immediately.

Fear sent goose-pimples up his arms as he studied the ceiling. He half expected her to spring down on him like a vicious leopard.

He wanted to avoid walking into the rooms, only to get ambushed by the entity.

"Usha, where are you? Come out darling, we need to leave right now," he said.

"You know where she is?" Aya's grating voice echoed through the house.

Instinctively, Vishal's eyes fell on the open door to the kitchen.

He could hear the thrumming of insect wings from within.

It did not come as a surprise to him that Aya had chosen to stage their final battle in the confines of a kitchen. She had destroyed his childhood in a similar room decades ago.

"Are you in the kitchen, Usha?" Vishal enquired.

"Why don't you come in and find out?" Aya said mischievously. Her comment was followed by cackling that grated on his eardrums.

He couldn't place the source of Aya's voice.

He prowled forward, craning his neck to glimpse his wife inside the room.

As he got closer, he heard Usha chanting an evil litany planted on her lips by the demonic possessor.

"I am coming, darling," he said, bolting towards the door.

A blur of limbs smashed into his side and knocked him to the floor.

"You have a lot more chutzpah than your pathetic father who walked into a similar trap with his eyes wide open," Aya said, climbing over him on all fours.

Ignoring the throbbing pain of the knockdown, Vishal tried to get up to his feet, but was quickly pinned to the floor by a furious Aya, who looked worse for wear. The sacred ash had eaten into her flesh like acid and big welts leaking yellow pus now criss-crossed her body. Repulsive, viscous juices fell on Vishal as Aya gripped his shoulders and repeatedly slammed him to the floor.

"But still weak. Just like your father," she said.

The wounds had done nothing to quell Aya's strength or fury. Vishal struggled to escape the monstrous being's vice-like grip.

A metal torch was resting on a shelf close to his feet. The other day, he left it there while fixing a blown fuse.

He kicked the shelf hard even as he endured Aya's furious strikes, which drew blood from his nostrils. Large gashes had opened up on the

sides of his face thanks to her razor-edged nails.

Usha screamed venomous words from the kitchen in a cracked voice that reminded him of Aya's vocalisations.

"You thought my womb was weak. Abhay didn't. A few more of your interstate trips and he would have given me what you couldn't," she said.

"This is not you talking. This monster has poisoned your mind," Vishal said.

"Hear that?" Aya said. "Hear what she thinks of your weak manhood?"

"You are enjoying this, aren't you?" Vishal said through gritted teeth.

"Not as much as when she minces your meat," the creature responded.

Vishal's third kick dropped the torch to the floor.

Aya's hairs sprang out like an aural crown, the individual strands twirling clockwise, then counter clockwise. The baleful yellow veins on her head squirmed agitatedly as her swollen eyes bore down lustily on Vishal's pained visage.

Vishal rolled the torch up towards his right hand with the aid of his feet, and before long, he wielded it like a weapon and smashed it into the side of Aya's grotesque skull.

The first blow was too weak to draw a reaction other than a surprised look from the wretched creature. But the next one crunched into her temple, caving it in. A tar like substance containing moth wings and gritty, rust-coloured matter oozed out of the mouth of the wound.

Vishal went for the ribs next. He clubbed the curved bones repeatedly, cracking them at multiple points.

Aya yowled in pain and leapt off Vishal.

"Take that bitch," he said, landing a hefty blow on her crown.

Jet black ichor sprayed on Vishal's face and the surrounding furniture.

Vishal was so driven by rage that he didn't care about the sour taste of her blood in his mouth. He sprang up and chased after Aya.

He slammed the torch into her torso and her head, relishing the sound of breaking bones.

Aya was now on her back, dragging herself away from her attacker with the aid of her arms. Her face was a mask of obsidian fluids and twisted in agony. She slipped various times on her own fluids as she tried to escape Vishal's wrath.

"This is for my mother and father," he said as he swung the torch

down on her crown again.

Shards of brittle bone matter exploded out of her cracked skull, exposing her rotting yellow brain. It smelled like excreta.

Aya propped herself up on an elbow, waved her free hand and pleaded, “No more.”

She begged for mercy in a series of single-word utterances that made no sense to Vishal. It was as if the pain had made her revert to the ancient tongue practised by her species.

“This is for my wife,” he said.

He ignored her pleas and swung the torch down on her for a final blow to her disgusting head. But the weapon did not connect with his enemy’s body.

Something slammed into the back of his head and rocked his brain inside his skull. He saw stars at first, and then a blanket of darkness dropped him where he stood.

He briefly regained consciousness and rolled on the floor, turning onto his back, hoping to glimpse his attacker.

Usha was holding a rolling pin with blood on it. Her posture was like that of a great ape, and madness leeched out of her eyes.

Mercifully, the darkness returned, and this time he couldn’t and didn’t want to fight it.

Chapter 23

He dreamt he was on vacation with his parents.

Those were happy times. They were in a comfortably appointed room at a Kodaikanal hill station resort, playing snakes and ladders. His parents were hugging and kissing each other as they watched him ascend the ladder all the way to 97. They cheered him as he rolled a 3 and reached the final square.

The sweetness of the moment made his heart burst with joy.

“We have a surprise for you,” they said in unison.

“Because I won?” Vishal enquired.

“Yes,” his mother said cheerfully, placing an arm on his father’s shoulders.

They both pointed behind him.

Vishal turned excitedly to see the gift they had got him.

In the distance, a young woman was seated in front of a campfire.

He turned to speak to his parents. They were nowhere to be seen.

He walked towards the woman, who was humming a tune and warming her hands.

She lifted her face and gazed at him with her soulful eyes. Her immense beauty struck him.

No words passed between them.

He knew some great destiny awaited both of them and that they would be fellow travellers on that great journey.

“I am Usha,” she said, “and it’s time for you to wake up.”

When Vishal regained consciousness, the first sensation he encountered was the burning bite of the ropes binding him to the chair.

His feet were also tied with plastic ropes that once bore wet clothes.

Then the rotten cabbage smell of cooking gas assailed his nostrils. It was so strong, Vishal struggled to inhale a lungful of air.

Usha stood to his right, staring down at him, her hands behind her back, a rictus grin smeared across her face. Her eyes were blank, as if someone had cored her soul out.

He was in the middle of the kitchen, far from structures or tools that might facilitate escape plans. Aya stood in the living room, watching him through the open door with great interest. She was covered in gaping, leprous wounds, and drenched in yellow and black fluids that made his stomach turn.

The revolting sight and the gas fumes made him heave clear vomit onto his clothes.

“Standing here, looking into the room, I realise what you must have felt as a child gazing upon my masterwork,” Aya croaked as her rheumy, yellow-veined eyes pursed in feline cruelty.

“Usha, untie me,” he said, struggling with the ropes.

“She won’t listen to you. She isn’t there anymore, if you know what I mean,” Aya said gleefully.

“I know exactly what you mean. You did to her what you did to my mother,” he said. “How can you do this to me again? You looked after me when I was a child?”

“A necessary chore in which I find no pleasure and to which I ascribe no sentiment,” she said, appearing remorseful for a second.

“You lie. Your heart is a rotting pile of nothingness. You are thoroughly relishing this,” he said spitefully.

“O child, truer words have never been spoken,” Aya said, shedding her expression of guilt. A heartless smile lit up her face as a thick rope of greyish drool oozed down the side of her mouth.

“I got you good,” Vishal said, studying the effects his attack had on the monster’s body.

“I will blossom again in a matter of moments,” Aya said, running her hands seductively over her revolting form.

Usha did not respond to further hails, so Vishal jumped up and down on the chair, shouting for help, hoping his voice would travel through the closed windows.

“There is no point, my child. It will be over soon,” Aya said.

“No. No. It can’t end like this,” Vishal said as hot tears streamed down his face, stinging his facial wounds. His whole body felt like it was on fire.

“I have concluded that after all these centuries of living amongst your kind, the thing I detest the most is your adherence to hope,” Aya said.

“Usha, untie me,” Vishal begged, even as he dragged the chair towards the open door.

“But I have made peace with it. Because it is exactly that sense of hope that makes your souls so tasty,” Aya said.

Vishal felt Usha’s hands grab onto the chair, stopping him in his tracks.She bent down and kissed the side of his cheek deeply.

He thought he heard her whimper.

“Usha, no. We can survive this. The prasad from the temple will heal you. Let’s work together and kick this monster out of our beautiful home. Untie me, please,” Vishal said, twisting around to face his wife.

“I must make an offering,” she said in a blank voice that matched the look on her face. “There is nothing you can do, darling.”

Years ago, when they opened up to each other at the yoga camp where they had a first met, she had told him about the untimely death of her parents in an accident, and the toll it had taken on her mental health over the decades.

Moved by the tragic tale and the pain in Usha’s eyes, Vishal had said to her, “If I could, I would scoop up all the hurt in your heart and make it mine.”

“There is nothing you can do, darling,” was her response then.

It pained him to hear those words again, here at the end.

Flick, chik, chik.

Usha lit the lighter.

Vishal was staring hatefully at Aya’s joyous giggling form when the gas cylinder exploded. It sent out a wash of blue flame followed by a radiant wave of yellow heat, lighting up the two beings in the room.

The smiling woman was hugging the screaming man seated in the chair from behind as the flames consumed everything in its path.

Chapter 24

I am an excellent cook, said wearing a plain yellow sari, said. I clean well," the woman in her 40s, "That's what they all say," the bald, oafish man in a dhoti and vest said, as he poked his left ear canal with his pinky finger.

"It's hard to get maids these days, you silly man. Stop behaving like you are interviewing her for an office job," his wife whispered in his free ear.

The woman who did not divulge her real name, but said everyone called her Aya, smiled at the owners who were seated on bamboo chairs set against a mural on the porch wall. She studied the artwork of Krishna surrounded by gopikas and then turned her attention to the eco-friendly, two-storey brick house.

"Your home radiates peace. It has been blessed," Aya said, looking around.

The couple smiled at the compliment.

"Your proposed salary is fine by us. When can you start?" the wife enquired.

"This very second, if you want me to," Aya said.

SACRED TIES

Chapter 1

Shamitha had watched the rolling hills of the Western Ghats disappear behind a thick forest of lush trees half an hour ago. She was yearning for a sight of their misty ridges as the car raced through the serpentine road towards their final destination—the exclusive couples retreat in Khor Ghat.

Her husband, Narain, expertly navigated the corners in their Toyota sedan and seemed to enjoy the drive through the verdant montane rainforests. A smile played on the corner of his lips as he fixed his eyes on the next curve. After all, he was the one who proposed the idea.

She was hesitant at first, but eventually recognised that they could not live without each other. They could also not continue living a life devoid of passion. This might be the radical spark that lights the fires in their hearts and their loins.

She took in the sight of his wavy hair, high cheekbones, regal nose, and small but shapely lips. She ran her eyes over his prominent Adam's apple, his collarbone, and the thin hair on his chest, visible through the top of his printed shirt. Features that once aroused her passions. But now, she encountered a blank canvas in her heart, devoid of colours.

The disconnection directly resulted from a horrible tragedy that had shattered them a decade ago. For the disconnection to linger this long was unbearable, unthinkable.

They were both in their early forties. Too young to be sleeping in separate beds. Too young to eschew pleasure, the warmth of sensual love, and the strength it brought to relationships.

Others might not understand why she had agreed to such a radical

intervention. But their marriage was nobody else's bloody business.

Narain detected her probing eyes on him and spoke up. "Not long to go now. Another half an hour."

"Hmm," she said, turning away from him.

Despite her stoicism on the matter, somewhere, a worry lingered. What if this naughty outing didn't fix their relationship? What if the experience was too much to handle? What if, God forbid, it tore them apart permanently?

She looked out into the trees and let out a shout of surprise as her eyes fell on a large group of humanoid shapes watching her intently from the shadows cast by the dense foliage.

She whirled around to peer at the shocking sight as the car zoomed through the forest road.

"What happened?" Narain enquired.

"I thought I saw. . ." she began saying.

"Animals?" Narain interjected.

"Not animals," she said, struggling for words. "Could be local tribes?"

"Don't think there are any indigenous tribes in this area," Narain said.

"You are right. They didn't seem . . . human. I mean, they resembled humans, but," she hesitated, remembering the malice that oozed from the shadowy figures.

"You can see where stories of monsters living in forests come from. These shrubs and trees could easily transform a small baboon into a big-foot," Narain said with a smile.

Shamitha laughed. "It wasn't a big-foot."

"Oh, that's great news," Narain chuckled.

"I must be tired," she thought, before shutting her eyes and leaning her head against the cold window. She willed the creepy sight away from her mind and focussed on her breathing, which lulled her into a light sleep.

Chapter 2

As always, the dream featured her little boy—bald, dressed in a hospital gown, tubes attached to his nostrils, and his arms trailing on the floor. His eyes were white as eggshells.

He beckoned to her as he walked on a forest path that snaked through tall grass.

The woods were unusually quiet. Birds didn't sing in the trees. Monkeys didn't howl from the heights.

The silence was unnerving, but the sight of her little man spurred Shamitha on.

She called out his name several times, but he didn't turn to face her.

They walked for some distance before reaching a glade, where the boy abruptly halted. His sick body tensed.

She stopped as well, wondering what had brought their journey to an end.

The boy stepped to the right and turned to face her, revealing what lay ahead. She saw that their journey had ended in front of a blocky structure wreathed in fog. She couldn't make out its exact shape or specific details. It was a solid mass, 3 feet tall.

"What is it?" she muttered.

The boy raised his right hand. He swept his forefinger from side to side and mouthed a 'no'.

"What is it?" she asked. Her voice wavered as her gut tightened with anxiety.

The boy shook his head, reiterating his warning.

"No? Why?" she enquired.

The mist thinned, and Shamitha saw darksome shapes behind the strange edifice, staring at her with ill intent.

She opened her mouth to shout a warning to her dead son, but they reached out through the fog with their taloned hands and pulled the boy into the miasma.

“No,” Shamitha screamed, as the car came to a stop and awareness of the world dawned on her like a gut punch.

Through the windscreen, Shamitha’s waking eyes sighted a couple in their 50s positioned at the entrance to a circular, single-storeyed building whose exterior walls were covered in murals depicting the forest and its flora and fauna. The structure was nestled in the middle of a dense forest and the steep road their sedan had climbed up was its lone link to the civilised world.

“I had a nightmare,” Shamitha said apologetically.

“I thought so,” Narain said. “Well, hopefully you will have pleasant dreams when we leave from here in seven days.”

Shamitha nodded and then turned her attention back to their welcoming party.

“Shall we say hello to our hosts,” Narain said cheerfully.

Shamitha squeezed her husband’s hand and smiled before exiting the vehicle.

The beaming hosts walked down a small flight of steps and approached them.

The woman, who looked older than her male counterpart, had a clean-shaven head, which bore a tiara made of jasmine flowers. The floral band complemented her embroidered hemp dress, which fit her snugly, and showcased a lean body nurtured by clean living. Her mouth formed a vulpine smile the moment her eyes fell on Narain. The smile disappeared when she turned to Shamitha, but her expression was not unpleasant.

Her lanky male partner was dressed in a white linen shirt and khaki shorts. His long, grey speckled hair was tied in a ponytail. He watched them with hooded eyes that seemed to harbour secrets. Henna tattoos of mandalas covered his forearms, and his fingers hosted several silver rings encrusted with coloured gems. He raised both his hands up in the air as if to enfold them both in an enormous hug.

“Welcome,” he said, his hands still raised. “I am Rishabh, and this is my partner, Devika. This is the exclusive Sacred Flames Resort in the heart of the Ghats. We provide couples with a safe, spiritual, and sensual haven, where they can heal from traumas and reconnect with each other

and other like-minded souls. We only have this one building, and every facility, every comfort you might need is contained within this beautiful structure. We welcome you to our sanctuary of love."

Narain introduced himself and his wife, and they all gave each other warm hugs.

Their hosts emanated a powerful scent similar to musk, but only stronger. Shamitha made a mental note to ask them later about the delightful perfume that made them smell like heaven.

"How was the drive?" Devika enquired.

"We had an interesting trip?" Narain said, glancing at Shamitha.

"Oh, I thought I saw some tribals in the forest and got a fright," Shamitha confessed hesitantly.

"No tribes in these hills. Not in this area. They live further east," Devika said.

"But these forests are the abode of spirits who were birthed before man," Rishabh added.

"He is just pulling your leg," Devika said. "There are no spirits in the forest. Only a flow of energy and deep calmness that lets one connect with their true nature, their soul, and their partner."

"No, I am not joking," Rishabh protested.

Devika shot him a look of displeasure and her partner signalled he got the message.

"Which brings me to the matter of technology," Rishabh said, glancing at the mobile phones clutched in the visitors' hands. "No access to these distracting devices while you are here."

"But if there is an emergency?" Narain enquired.

"We are not burying your phones," Devika grinned. "We will safely store it in our office and you can access it if you really need to."

Shamitha extended her phone towards Rishabh and then hesitated. But, when she saw Narain hand over his phone, she followed suit.

"The other couple will be here in a few hours. I am sure you would want to rest and freshen up for this evening's introductions," Rishabh said, smiling mischievously.

"What delights lay ahead of us," Devika said. "Come, let's tour the facilities."

Shamitha studied the thick forest buzzing with life around them. No watchers amongst the trees here. Just a wall of impenetrable verdure.

She collected her luggage from the trunk and followed the hosts into their new sanctuary.

Chapter 3

The dining room, with its long rustic wooden table and walls adorned with handwoven baskets and farm tools, had gained an ethereal aspect thanks to the scores of candles arranged in silver candelabras around the space.

Shamitha and Narain, their hosts, and the other couple, were now seated around the table. A buffet of vegetarian cuisine was spread out before them on clay tableware.

The 'other couple'—a pair of loved-up 40-year-olds—were not strangers to Shamitha or Narain.

Tanvi was a former broadcast journalism colleague of Narain's. She and her husband, Aakash, ran a thriving advertising firm in Delhi.

Shamitha had always wondered if the two had a thing for each other, something Narain had denied on several occasions. They always communicated through social media, and whenever they chatted on a video call, Narain made it a point to include Shamitha in the conversation.

Aakash called Narain a year ago and indicated that he and his wife were in an open relationship and had agreed to have other sexual partners while keeping their marriage intact. According to Aakash, it had revitalised their relationship. He revealed that he and Tanvi had been organising parties in a Gurgaon farmhouse to introduce prospective couples to the new way of life.

Narain, in return, had opened up to him about his marital issues.

In time, Aakash convinced Narain to embrace the swinging lifestyle. The Sacred Flames Resort holiday was the outcome of several additional

discussions, which included Shamitha and Tanvi.

Narain and Shamitha were not keen on attending the farmhouse parties with new couples. They were, however, willing to give it a go in the resort's tranquil and spiritual atmosphere, along with their trustworthy Delhi-based sponsors.

Presently, Rishabh raised a glass of wine and said, "A toast to the beautiful souls present here tonight."

Everyone raised their glasses and sipped the drink.

Aakash had preserved his youthful appearance well into his 40s, and had the physique of a cyclist. Veins snaked over his toned arms, and his waxed skin emanated a healthy glow.

Tanvi, the younger of the two, reminded Shamitha of the beautiful Punjabi TV star who was her mother's favourite. She had a milky white complexion, full lips, voluptuous curves, and a smile fit for a noir movie siren. Every time she turned to lock her gaze on somebody, her straight, raven black hair bounced to life.

"This resort is set on an ancient piece of land that is said to have once featured a Kinnara palace. As you can see from these paintings, the kinnaras admired art, music, and the finer pleasures that life offered. They believed in the soul's enrichment through love and pleasure. Their music was the sound of moans and orgasms," Rishabh added, pointing to various pieces of art depicting half-human, half-bird creatures making music or love in opulent chambers adorned with gems.

"This is a sanctuary for you to shed your inhibitions in absolute privacy and enjoy new pathways to pleasure, just like the kinnaras did centuries ago," he continued.

Shamitha's internal alarm went off during the morning tour of the complex, with its beautifully designed lounging areas, massage rooms, spas, and velvet-laced bedrooms for couples to engage with a larger group of playmates. Not to mention the beautiful floral and vegetable gardens that surrounded the circular building.

She could not pinpoint the cause of her suspicion, but similar feelings assailed her mind, as she sipped her wine.

She detected duplicity in Rishabh's brown irises. Devika also appeared to be concealing some dark secrets. She had a habit of casting furtive glances around the room as if she was on the lookout for an unseen watcher in the walls.

Perhaps the terrifying dream featuring Ashwath and the frightening vision of the woodland spirits had set her on edge.

"Here are your contract templates, where you will lay down the rules

of engagement with each other. This will guide your intimate encounters over the next few days. Write your desires and your reservations. What do you hope to experience? What do you forbid?" Devika said, passing a basket filled with paper scrolls aged with dyes to give them a vintage look.

"We will fill out the details later tonight. But for now, let's enjoy the meal and each other's company," Rishabh said.

"Cheers to that," Narain said, raising his glass and encouraging Shamitha to do so.

Aakash and Tanvi followed suit, fixing the couple with lusty looks.

Rishabh and Devika glanced around the table, beaming with satisfaction.

They were people who clearly enjoyed setting the stage for a grand performance, Shamitha mused about their hosts.

Maybe it was her conservative streak that made her suspicious of them. After all, they were wardens of a lifestyle that was taboo in mainstream India.

Shamitha hushed the klaxons in her mind and resolved to enjoy the rest of the evening. She was eager to spend more time with Tanvi and Aakash.

She reminded herself that she was here to awaken her dead soul, scarred by grief, and save her marriage, not wallow in speculations about the older couple and their kinky enterprise.

Chapter 4

Narain and Shamitha lay in bed, staring at the shadows cast on the ceiling by the shrubbery outside their window.

"That was nice, wasn't it?" Narain said.

"Everyone seemed so lovely," Shamitha responded.

"I am glad we are giving this a shot with Tanvi and her husband. I feel a genuine connection with them," Narain said after a brief pause.

"I mean, it doesn't feel sleazy or anything," Shamitha added.

"Exactly," Narain responded.

A night breeze riled up the bushes, and shadows bounced across the ceiling like a ship on rough waters.

Narain leant over and planted a passionate kiss on Shamitha's mouth. She hesitated at first, but then her lips reciprocated.

A spark sprang to life in their souls. Their bodies registered the stirrings of something dormant but powerful.

Narain ran his hands over her neck and caressed her breasts.

Shamitha inhaled sharply as his fingertips brushed against her nipples.

Then, out of nowhere, a flood of grief swept over her.

Her lips and torso grew stiff. Narain sensed her loss of interest and drew back.

Shamitha noticed in him shades of the same anguish that had overwhelmed her.

"Sorry," Shamitha said.

"There is no need to apologise," Narain said with a sad smile.

"We have been wallowing in grief for far too long. We will defeat this

darkness together," Shamitha said.

"Maybe not tonight, hey? And that's okay," Narain replied. "That is why we are here, away from the hustle and bustle of our daily lives.

"Of course, sweetie," Shamitha said.

Shamitha climbed out of bed and moved to the closed window. She brushed away a single tear as she observed her surroundings through the glass.

The forest was a wall of darkness, a bulwark against marauding bloodthirsty beasts with sharp fangs and tusks.

'Shit,' she thought, reflecting on her reaction to Narain's approach. 'It would have been preferable if they had connected before. . .'

Motion sensors triggered the exterior security lights.

Shamitha's eyes were drawn to humanoid forms amongst the trees. She detected scales and what looked like matted fur. The creatures, shocked by the startling brightness, retreated behind the woods.

Shamitha let out a startled shout and staggered backwards.

"What is it?" Narain asked.

"I. . . I. . ." Shamitha managed.

She was not ready to have her observations questioned again.

"Nothing," she said, eventually.

She took cautious steps towards the windows. The lights were off, and darkness reclaimed its domain.

She searched for aberrant shapes. Her human eyes, however, failed to detect anything peculiar.

"An optical illusion," she persuaded herself unconvincingly before retiring for the evening. A sleepless night filled with nightmares ensued.

Chapter 5

"Ma. Please, no," Shamitha heard her sleep-8-year-old son call out to her.

"Ma." His words jolted her awake from her slumber.

She glanced around, bewildered. It took her a few seconds to recognise her surroundings.

Narain was fast asleep beside her.

'Awful nightmares,' she thought as she took in deep breaths to calm down.

"Ma," the voice called out from the forest.

The digital clock on the wall displayed 6.38. The sun had most likely risen in the last half hour.

"Ma."

She sprang out of bed and approached the window.

Shamitha had a flashback of last night's terrifying experience.

She scanned her surroundings. No demonic shapes lurking amongst the trees.

"Ma."

"Beta," she mouthed involuntarily.

A newsreel of traumatic recollections played in her mind.

The moment she discovered Ashwath had cancer. The weird painting of a desolate meadow outside the hospital's radiation recovery ward. Shamitha sobbing into a pillow as Ashwath moaned in anguish in another room. The sight of his lifeless body, draped in a dazzling white sheet, being lowered into a grave. Narain's wails shattering the funerary silence of their home in the weeks after Ashwath's passing.

“Ma.”

‘This makes no sense,’ she thought. ‘Ashwath is gone. What if this is all in my mind?’

She decided not to wake up Narain, who was sleeping deeply.

She put on her jeans and her t-shirt, and grabbed a torch on her way out of the room.

There could only be one explanation; some child was lost in the woods and needed help.

There was no one in the kitchen when she crossed it to emerge into the backyard.

“Ma.”

Although the rising sun had lifted the darkness, she turned on the torch. She walked towards the area of the woods where she believed she heard the voice.

She used the torchlight to make sure there were no surprises in store for her.

The little circle of light revealed a cleared road cutting through the verdure. She noticed dried flower petals on the path.

A placard on a wooden stake read: ‘Danger. Do not enter.’

Birds chirped warnings above her as she took a few timid steps towards the dried red petals.

She studied them closely. ‘Were they from a ceremony?’

“Ma.” The voice was right ahead of her.

She raised her eyes, and there stood Ashwath in his pyjamas. He had a bald head and pale skin. Tubes riddled his body. His eyes were black pits.

Terror, longing, and sorrow wrenched her psyche in different directions, threatening to rend her sanity.

“Ma,” he said, before turning and pointing at the path ahead.

A vigorous rustling sound yanked her away from the terrifying sight. Something was scurrying about in the bushes.

She returned her gaze to the infernal vision of her long dead son. But he was no longer there.

“Ashwath,” she called out to him.

The rustling sound returned. This time closer.

Horror swelled up inside her. She took a single backward step, still scanning for threats in the dense foliage. The buzzing of insects reached a fever pitch, and it gave her gooseflesh.

Shamitha thought she saw a shadowy form, taller than a man, peering through the foliage with glowing eyes.

“Don’t move,” a voice warned her from behind.

She froze.

A barrel appeared in her peripheral vision. A beat later, Rishabh emerged, his finger on the trigger. He was scanning the location of the disturbance with his hunting rifle.

Shamitha, who was still shaken from the spooky encounter, was terrified of the possibility that an animal was stalking her. She trembled like a leaf.

“Could be anything—a macaque, a dhole, a honey badger, or worse, a leopard or an elephant,” Rishabh said in a low voice.

“What?” Shamitha muttered fearfully.

“It’s unlikely. They usually avoid human settlements,” Rishabh said, looking her up and down.

“I can’t hear it anymore,” Shamitha said.

“We have never had an incident, but you never know. I keep this gun loaded and ready in my office, just in case,” Rishabh said, lowering his gun.

“Thank you,” Shamitha said, before letting out a sigh of relief.

“You should not wander the grounds by yourself,” Rishabh said. “Even we don’t venture out here, and we have been living here for years.”

“Where does this path lead to?” she asked. “Why does it look well-trodden if no one uses it?”

“Just a path in the forest that might prove fatal to visitors who don’t understand and respect its boundaries,” he said venomously. “Come. Follow me.”

“No, seriously. Where does it lead to?” She insisted.

Rishabh turned and trotted towards the resort.

“Did you put this warning sign up? Why?” Shamitha shouted.

Rishabh sighed with frustration. He faced her and said, “There are lots of ancient ruins and bottomless pits around here. Can you imagine what would happen to our little business if we had an accident?”

Shamitha deliberated on his response. What he said made sense, even though his words had a ring of deception to them.

“Come let’s go,” he said.

She had seen Ashwath. That was an undeniable fact.

And he wanted her to see something at the end of that mysterious track.

Chapter 6

Narain and Shamitha were led to a beautifully appointed room with velvet trimmings for a couples massage, following a leisurely breakfast and a hot spa session.

Rishabh gave Narain an Ayurvedic massage, while Devika treated Shamitha.

The room was filled with a heady aroma meant to calm the senses, and their hosts were clearly skilled practitioners, but Shamitha struggled to relax into the experience.

The morning's events still had a vice grip on her. She hadn't told Narian yet, and it was killing her. Rishabh hadn't mentioned it either.

The masseurs poured sweet-smelling oil from clay pots and massaged it into their skin. The same scent had piqued Shamitha's curiosity when she met them for the first time.

"What is in this oil?" Shamitha asked.

"Oh, it's an ancient recipe. We call it the Kinnara's kiss, because those mythical beings are said to have invented it," Devika said.

"Hell of a marketing copy," Narain scoffed.

"Oh, it's no joke. We found the recipe in Sanskrit scrolls unearthed from around the property when we were digging up soil to establish our gardens," Rishabh said.

"O wow!" Shamitha exclaimed.

"You are truly experiencing divinity," Devika said as she kneaded Shamitha's flesh with her firm hands.

Narain giggled, and perhaps for the first time today, Shamitha smiled.

Devika grunted in displeasure.

The tension returned to Shamitha's body. She was back in that forest full of dreadful sights and invisible threats.

Sensing the tension in her, Devika said, "Let go of the stress. You don't want dark clouds hanging over you tonight as you embrace new partners and share your energies with them."

Shamitha was reminded by her statements that, at the dinner last night, they had agreed to attempt intimacy with the other couple later tonight. Not that she was looking forward to it, given her emotional turmoil.

Shamitha wanted to speak to Narain about what had transpired, but she was worried about the consequences.

'I will bring it up tomorrow,' she told herself.

She closed her eyes and breathed in the musky scent of the oils. The memory of the shining eyes that had peered at her from the dense foliage banished any semblance of pleasure offered by the fragrance.

Chapter 7

Suppose you have not met Rishabh and Devika before?" Narain asked in Aakash and Tanvi shook their heads in unison.

The two couples sat on an immense bed that could comfortably accommodate six people. The scarlet silk bedding matched the colour scheme of the room, which featured sensual paintings and statues engaged in coitus.

"Seriously, this is your first time here?" Shamitha asked.

"Yes," Tanvi confirmed.

"They reached out to us via email and offered a great discount to try out the facilities," Aakash added.

"They don't advertise the venue anywhere and are very picky about who they invite. We are not even meant to post about it on social media," Tanvi said.

"Doesn't that sound dodgy to you?" Shamitha asked.

"You say that because you are new to the lifestyle, darling," Tanvi said in a condescending tone. "Do you want your face splashed in every yellow journal and gossip site in this country? We appreciate the privacy. Most of the couples in our community would."

"People don't approve of our way of life. Rishabh and Devika, who are veterans, want to support and grow the community. I mean, look at the facilities. This is a paradise for non-conformists like us," Aakash said passionately.

"I mean, taking our phones seems extreme, no?" Shamitha said.

"I don't even miss mine. Who wants the distraction of that thing

chiming away every few seconds?" Aakash said.

"I see your point. I, for one, am very grateful that a sanctuary like this exists in the modern world," Narain said.

Shamitha shot him a worried look before saying, "Maybe it's the forest. Or that all of this is so new to me. I am unnerved by it all," Shamitha said.

"Perfectly understandable," Akash said, extending his hand towards Shamitha. He then nodded to Tanvi.

Tanvi grabbed Narain's hands and pulled him towards her.

"Are we going to take our first steps towards bliss tonight or keep talking about our mobile phones?" Aakash told Shamitha with a smile.

Shamitha returned the smile and placed her right hand in his left palm.

She slid up to him like a mermaid crossing silky waters.

Their faces were now close to each other, their gazes drawn to one another's. Aakash was sliding his fingers up and down Shamitha's arm, a sensation she found pleasing.

"You are beautiful, you know," Aakash said.

"Thank you," she responded confidently.

She glanced to her left and saw Narain and Tanvi playfully exploring each other's bodies with their hungry hands.

The temperature in the room had risen. The passionate energy radiating out from the circle of lovers caused the candles to flicker.

Aakash's attractive features and seductive aroma reawakened Shamitha's long-buried passions. Those raging emotions clashed with the jealousy she felt after witnessing her spouse with another woman.

And at the heart of it all was a whirlwind of dread—a vortex of shadows birthed by the forest. The blackness sprouted yellow eyes and a mouth bristling with spiny teeth. It screamed out to her, "Ma."

Aakash pulled her in for a kiss.

"Ma. Ma." The calls bounced off the insides of her skull.

Shamitha landed a peck on Aakash's lips and pulled back.

"Can we stop for today?" she declared to the room.

Narain, who was in the midst of a passionate kiss with Tanvi, froze. Shamitha could hear the woman grumble in annoyance at the interruption.

"Did I. . ." Aakash began saying.

"No. You did nothing wrong," Shamitha said. "Something happened today. I just. . ."

"There is no rush," Aakash said, glancing at Narain.

“Yes sweetie. We can stop now, no problem,” Narain said.
“I need to talk to you about something,” Shamitha said to Narain.

Chapter 8

Narain could not sleep after hearing Shamitha's account of her experience in the woods. He sat on the couch, lost in contemplation, looking out the window.

It was the reaction Shamitha had feared. Narain had taken a long time to recover from their son's death.

But she believed he had a right to know.

Shamitha had sat next to him for a few hours, comforting him. Then around 2 in the morning, overcome by exhaustion, she moved to the bed and fell asleep.

Narain was still in the same position when she awoke a little after 7.30 a.m., fatigued and rubbing his eyes.

"Are you okay?" she asked.

"Do you remember the morning after Ashwath's burial?" He asked.

"Narain. . ." she said.

"It was a beautiful morning like this. But I couldn't see its beauty. There was a blue tinge to everything. Everything seemed so cold," he said.

She knew what he spoke of. She could never forget the desolation of that morning. It was like a hoarfrost of bleakness had conquered everything—even the sun-kissed objects on God's good earth.

"I couldn't drive away that chill for a long time," Narain said.

"I know," she said.

"When you told me last night about what you had seen in the woods, I felt that icy touch in my soul briefly. A calling card of sorts, reminding me it could return at will, whenever it chose to," he said.

“I am sorry,” Shamitha said, tearing up.

“Don’t be. I am glad you told me,” he said.

“You believe me?” she asked.

“I believe you saw what you saw. I also believe that the forest and the anxiety around what we are about to do might have contributed to what you saw,” he said.

“But, I. . .” she began saying.

“Can you entirely discount that as a possibility?” he asked.

“No,” she said reluctantly.

“And I can’t entirely pooh-pooh your belief that you encountered something supernatural. That you saw our dear son’s ghost,” he said.

“You will come with me?” Shamitha pleaded.

“I was waiting for you to wake up,” he said with a smile.

Chapter 9

Narain and Shamitha entered the path, ignoring the warning sign, armed with a torch and a metal plate from the room in case they needed to frighten wild creatures by making a racket.

They walked through the forest alive with the calls of animals and birds, none of which were threatening. Caterpillars and colourful insects lounged lazily on bright green leaves drenched in morning dew. A bright blue sky was visible through the canopy as they trudged along the leaf-littered path, their footsteps sending lizards bolting for the undergrowth.

The path dipped and cut through a tiny stream, where leeches hitched a ride on their ankles. The couple halted, and Narain extracted the critters by sliding his fingernail under their mouths. He helped a squeamish Shamitha first before attending to his own bleeding skin.

The banks of the waterway teemed with vibrant life. As they contemplated the beauty of their surroundings, they both smiled. They spotted a thin, green snake coiled around a branch in the distance and admired a yellow flower as big as a human head, which hosted a gaudy spider. They briefly forgot the concerns that had prompted them to embark on this expedition.

They continued their journey and had just crested a tiny hill when Narian piped up, “I don’t think it’s wise to venture any further.”

“We don’t have to,” Shamitha replied, pointing to a cluster of roofless, ruined rooms and piles of rocks engulfed in plant life.

Narain responded with an audible gasp.

The ruins, which were most likely the remains of an ancient palace complex, stretched for some distance, with the outermost sections

swallowed whole by the dense forest. None of the decrepit structures stood over 5 feet tall. It was as if a giant had hacked off the top half of the ancient palace with a massive axe and tossed it into the distance.

Shamitha thought she heard a few notes from a veena in the distance.

'My mind is playing tricks on me,' she thought. 'How can one not be touched by the mysterious quality of this place?'

"Where are we?" Narain asked.

"The palace of the kinnaras," Shamitha said breathlessly.

"Surely not," Narain said.

"Why not?" Shamitha said.

"Those are myths, Shamitha," Narain said. "Fairytales."

"What if it's true?" She said.

They uncovered vandalised sculptures on the stone walls. Crude instruments had been used to reduce what may have once been ornate figures into flattened or malformed shapes.

"Didn't Rishabh say something about deep pits?" Narain mused. "Watch your step."

Shamitha nodded and continued exploring the roofless Kinnara ruins. Unseen forces lured her towards the complex's centre.

"Where are you going? I think I have seen enough. Let's just take some snaps and head back now that your curiosity has been sated," Narian said impatiently.

"We are nearly there," she said.

"Where? I think we are smack bang in the middle of the ruins. It will just be more of the same," Narain complained.

"Look," Shamitha said, pointing to a crumbling stone well.

Shamitha thought she heard the mournful veena again. This time, the music came from somewhere below.

"Be careful," Narain warned, as Shamitha stepped warily towards the well.

"I will," she responded.

Her inner voice spurred her on. 'This is what Ashwath wanted you to see.'

When she reached the rim of the well, she halted and studied the ancient structure that thrummed with malign energy.

She identified a secure section, placed her hands on the cold stone wall, and peered down into its depths.

Then she screamed.

Chapter 10

Heading to the dining table, where Aakash and Shamitha and the guests were already seated, Devika asked, “How do you explain this?” Shamitha looked at her confusedly.

“The skeletons have been at the bottom of the old well since forever. This is not shocking news to me. What I can’t figure out is why you two ventured out to the ruins, ignoring my warnings?” Rishabh said angrily.

Devika shook her head disappointedly.

“You could have seriously injured yourself, and our little operation would have been shut down by the authorities,” Rishabh said.

“You still haven’t answered my question?” Shamitha said.

“It’s an ancient site that was apparently the domain of the kinnaras. Other kings and tribes ruled from that place in subsequent centuries. I won’t be surprised if you scoured the area and found more human remains, weapons, and treasures,” Rishabh said.

“I am no expert, but the skeletons looked fresh, not like the ones you see in documentaries at archaeological sites,” Narain said.

“Anything we should be worried about?” Aakash asked, a look of concern furrowing his brow.

Devika ignored the question, and turned to Shamitha, saying “Look, I understand how you feel. I felt the same way the first time I accidentally discovered the well and the ruins. On my way back to report the sighting to Rishabh, I nearly fell into a pit. Which is why my darling partner put up that board.”

“Did you care to learn more about the bones?” Shamitha asked, acridly.

“It’s just a collection of bones from ages ago, when tribes lived in this

stretch of the forest. They no doubt practiced human sacrifice and other dark rituals. That is all we have been able to garner from the workers who helped us establish this site," Devika offered.

"I am happy for all of us to have a look at the site together if that will help allay your fears," Rishabh said, looking at Aakash and Tanvi.

Then he turned to Narain and Shamitha and said, "But after that, I want you to put this thing to bed. I hear last night's session was cut short because. . ."

There was an awkward silence as Aakash, Tanvi, and Devika glanced at Shamitha knowingly.

"If you still have concerns about being here, you can leave," Rishabh said. "We will return your money, minus the booking fees."

"I don't need to see the skeletons. I am satisfied with your explanation," Tanvi said.

"I am with Tanvi on this," Aakash said.

Rishabh nodded his thanks.

Shamitha looked at Narian. She felt that his mind was on the same page as hers. Their hosts' explanation made sense. Their worries about the safety of their guests and the future of their business seemed genuine.

There was a strange aura about the ruins—a menacing intelligence that was probing the weaknesses of those who dared to trespass. Shamitha had sensed its invisible tentacles ransacking her mind as she walked through that decrepit site. And there was no denying that she had seen the spirit of her son.

Maybe Aswath was trying to stop her from visiting the site.

"We don't need to visit the site again. I am satisfied with your explanation," Shamitha said, even as a lonesome veena played a doleful tune in the chambers of her exhausted mind.

Chapter 11

Within a chamber, hushed voices spoke.

“They have communicated their desire.” The man said.

“Is tonight the night?” The woman said.

“Yes.” The man said.

The woman sighed in relief.

“You are glad, aren’t you? That woman is feisty,” he said.

“I hope she suffers,” she said.

“I can’t wait to hear her scream,” he said.

Chapter 12

The two couples were enjoying a late afternoon swim in a man-made pool bordered by lush foliage. Rocks and ferns dotted the landscaped surroundings, giving them the feeling that they were soaking in a natural forest pool.

Tanvi wrapped her arms around Narain as he travelled the pool's perimeter, dragging her along.

Shamitha and Aakash were standing in the middle of the pool, their naked bodies pressing against each other.

"What an adventure you have had," Aakash said.

"You are teasing me," Shamitha said, poking him in the ribs.

"No, I am not. It shocked me to hear about the ruins and the skeletons," Aakash said.

"But you and Tanvi didn't want to see it," Shamitha said.

"We will on the last day. Right now, we are focussed on this experience. Ever since adopting the lifestyle, Tanvi and I are so in harmony with the present. All the delights of the universe are unfolding at this very moment, not in the nostalgia for the past or the apprehensions we hold in our hearts for the future," he said, watching his wife passionately kiss Narain.

Shamitha studied her husband, who was sucking Tanvi's tongue like it was a forbidden fruit. Jealousy did not tie her guts into a knot.

She relaxed into the knowledge that Narain was nestled in the joyful centre of this blissful moment, and even though she was not physically connected to him, it was her unwavering support that had helped him experience this.

Around her, the forest came alive with the buzzing of a thousand insects. It raised gooseflesh on her shoulders and arms.

“Nature taking its course,” Aakash said in a seductive tone.

“Are you looking forward to the ceremony tonight, which is apparently performed under the light of the stars?” Shamitha asked.

“I am looking forward to becoming a part of you under the night sky,” Aakash said as he moved closer for a kiss.

This time, Shamitha reciprocated his passion with her famished lips.

Chapter 13

The creatures watched from beneath the shade of trees, shielded from the searing heat that would have otherwise burnt their flesh.

They gazed hungrily at the water-dappled skins of the swimmers. The meat on these offerings was of exceptional quality.

They chittered quietly in delight. Their shrivelled sexual organs swelled in anticipation of the ritual and the carnage that would follow.

A breeze delivered the heady scent of flowers to the creatures' nostrils. The humans were now kissing and fondling each other, their moans mingling with the splashing water.

It reminded them of the times they cavorted in pristine water bodies in the forest's heart.

They gazed sorrowfully at their withering bodies. It was glorious once. Now it was a greying husk covered in sores and oozing pus over their sparse, discoloured feathers.

At least, the ceremony would offer them temporary relief from the ravages of the disease.

At least, the flesh would taste good on their tongues.

Chapter 14

Shamitha, Narain, Aakash, and Tanvi realised they had not been shown the ceremonial room when they first toured the facilities. They had assumed the locked door led to a storage area that did not warrant an inspection.

A big round bed dominated the circular space in its centre. The velvet-trimmed furnishings and lascivious art within were no different from those in the other playrooms, but it was more spacious.

Their naked bodies were wreathed in sage smoke as soon as they entered the large chamber. Earthen vases containing the burning herbs were placed around the room on marble pedestals.

Rishabh and Devika, both dressed in ritualistic crimson robes studded with many coloured gems, shepherded the four lovers onto the bed.

Rishabh grabbed an old parchment from underneath the bed and began chanting mantras as Devika waved a large leaf over the couples, fanning the smoke onto their skin. Snaking white tendrils coiled around them like lustful spirit snakes.

“May Lord Kama infuse his blessings into every pore in your body,” Devika said as the lovers kissed and caressed each other.

The sensuous encounter in the pool had filled them with carnal hungers, which demanded release in the hallowed space.

Unable to contain their desire for each other, Tanvi and Narain copulated in the missionary position.

Aakash went down on Shamitha and latched onto her pink folds with his ravenous mouth.

Lost in the tangle of limbs and the intoxication of lust, they initially

failed to notice that Rishabh had depressed a button on the wall. The false roof above retracted, revealing a glass ceiling through which the midnight sky was clearly visible. Moonlight bathed the couples in a blue glow, which immediately drew their attention to the heavenly spectacle.

Shouts of amazement rose from their lips as they relished the sight briefly before turning back to their chosen lovers and continuing their journey towards ecstasy.

“The universe is witnessing your joyful union,” Devika shouted over the pious chanting of her partner.

“May your libidinous energies enliven every skein of life in this forest,” she declared.

Moans and lascivious urgings mingled with Rishab’s Sanskrit mantras, which the lovers neither understood nor cared for.

Tanvi was shouting for Narain to pound her deeper, and he obliged.

Shamitha was in the throes of ecstasy as Aakash sucked on her clit. She watched the moon, whose beatific beams lit up her breasts and belly, as she relished the waves of pleasure lashing through her body.

Out of the corner of her vision, she spotted what seemed like several pairs of eyes peering down from the edges of the false ceiling. They reminded her of the glowing eyes in the forest that induced paranoia and fear in her.

She focussed on the discovery to confirm that the radiant yellow eyes didn’t belong to iridescent insects or wild animals, exploring the sight below with curiosity.

Rishabh, who was smudging the bed and its occupants with a fresh stack of burning herbs, blocked her view. She had apologised to the man earlier that day for her anxious interruptions of the resort’s sacred activities. Presently, she felt the apology might have been premature.

She scanned the transparent ceiling as soon as he moved out of the way.

Nothing. Just the starry sky, a pregnant moon, and the dark shapes of the canopy disturbed by a night breeze.

What had leered down at them from the ceiling? Had the others seen it? Where is it now? A million questions raced through Shamitha’s mind.

“Feast on the blessings of Kama, holy ones. Your vibrations are in tune with the cosmos now,” Devika said, as she opened the ancient scroll her partner had read from previously. She began chanting verses from the text. Her husband joined her with his booming voice.

Shamitha looked on in concern as Rishabh and Devika walked back to the very edge of the room and pressed their backs against the wall,

bright smiles splashed across their faces.

Something was wrong. Her fellow lovers were oblivious to the actions of their hosts. Shamitha's inner voice begged her to escape the room.

She witnessed Rishabh open a side panel on the wall, which hid a niche containing a lever.

"Stop," she shouted at Aakash, who was about to penetrate her with his erect cock.

She pushed him away in an attempt to flee.

Rishabh yanked on the lever.

Hidden gears groaned like ghouls disturbed from their slumber, and the floor tilted over 45 degrees, throwing the lovers off the bed.

The sudden displacement shocked and disoriented the guests and prevented them from latching onto safety. Four naked bodies tumbled down the slanted floor and plunged into a 12-foot-deep pit.

Chapter 15

While the fall knocked the wind out of Shamitha, the hay-padded floor prevented any damage to her bones. She had expected the bed to slide and fall on their heads, but it was clearly bolted to the floor. Even the luxurious mattress and sheets were stuck faithfully to the bed frame.

She heard the others groan as she sat up and tried to orient herself.

They were in a circular space that replicated the dimensions of the room above, albeit without the decadent furnishings. Luminescent blue rocks of unknown origin shone dimly from the walls, revealing the hay-covered cave floor.

Entryways to seven tunnel systems surrounded them like open mouths waiting to suck the life out of them. Some were brightened by the luminous rocks. Others were passages into infinite darkness.

Shamitha turned her gaze upwards as the others pleaded for help.

Rishabh and Devika looked down at them gleefully.

"O *kinnaras*. Purveyors of ethereal pleasures. Accept these delicious offerings. Grant us our boons," Devika said, as her husband chanted vile mantras.

Rage blossomed in Shamitha's gut. She was furious at not having followed her instincts.

"Hey. Hey," she shouted.

Narain wrapped his arms around her and enquired about her welfare.

"I am okay," Shamitha said.

"Help us," Narain shouted, looking up at the partially opened roof and the cruel faces staring down at them.

“Have you got a ladder?” Aakash asked. “Get us out of here.”

“They will not help us,” Shamitha said. “This was a trap from the beginning.”

“What do you mean?” Tanvi asked, her lips quivering in anger.

“They mean to sacrifice us to kinnaras. . .” Shamitha began saying.

“Shut up, looney,” Tanvi said, rounding on Shamitha.

“Take it easy, Tanvi,” Narain interjected, placing himself between the two women.

“Look,” Shamitha said, pointing at their hosts.

Devika’s hand disappeared into the secret niche.

“Good hunting, lords. We pray your rituals are fruitful,” Devika said, as the ceiling rose and slotted back into place, depriving the fallen souls of the light source from above and the sight of their traitorous hosts.

The four of them stood speechless, awash in the light of the mysterious stones.

“What is going on here?” Aakash asked, sounding desperate.

“This must be some kind of fucked-up game those old farts devised to amuse themselves in their retirement,” Narain said bitterly.

“I swear, I am going to kill them both when I get out of here,” Tanvi said.

“No,” Shamitha said, clutching the sides of her face. “This can’t be happening.”

“And this crazy woman keeps talking about sacrifices and mythical creatures,” Tanvi raged at Shamitha.

“What sacrifice?” Narain asked.

“Did you not hear them? We are prey; gifts for whatever hunts in this subterranean hell,” Shamitha said.

“She might be onto something,” Aakash said.

“Thanks for checking if I am okay, idiot,” Tanvi said to her husband, the veneer of civility and contentment cracking in places.

Aakash shook his head.

“This explains the bones in the well,” Shamitha said.

“Fuck no. I am not turning into a pile of bleached bones,” Aakash declared.

“I can’t listen to this nonsense. It makes my blood boil,” Tanvi said.

“I think you are in denial,” Narain said to her.

Tanvi walked away from the confrontation and slammed her fist against the rock wall.

“We need to find a way to get out of here,” Aakash said.

“We can all agree on that,” Shamitha said.

“These rocks. . .” Narain said, approaching the luminescent objects, “it’s not powered by electricity.”

“At least we have some light down here,” Aakash said, looking around at the entrances to the tunnels. He noticed that a few of them were dark while the others were lit by blue phosphorescence. He instantly amended his words to, “mostly.”

“Shhh,” Narain interrupted Aakash. “I hear footsteps. Anklets?”

Shamitha studied the tunnels to determine the location of the ruins. She attempted to picture where the room above was in the resort, as well as the trail that led to the bone-filled well.

“We need to go in the opposite direction of the ruins,” she muttered to herself.

“What?” Aakash asked.

Shamitha repeated herself, loud and clear.

“We must stay together no matter which direction we choose to go,” Narain said, his ears still seeking the source of the distant footfalls.

“Ma,” a voice called out to Shamitha from one of the darkened tunnels.

Her flesh prickled, and she spun towards it.

“Did you hear that, Narain?” Shamitha asked.

“The footsteps are getting closer,” Narain said, referring to the growing ruckus.

“Ma,” she heard her son call out to her again. “This way”

“Narain, I heard Aswath,” Shamitha said.

“What are you saying?” Narain said, grabbing her shoulders.

“I can’t hear anything through here. And it is well lit. Let’s move,” Tanvi said to the group, pointing to one of the tunnel entrances.

“We have to go that way, trust me,” Shamitha said, directing the group’s attention to a pitch-black passageway.

“Fuck that. Are you crazy?” Aakash said.

“Yeah, double fuck that. We are not putting our lives in danger because of your intuition,” Tanvi said.

“Shamitha, what’s going on?” Narain said.

“Can you please trust me on this one?” Shamitha said tearfully.

“It’s pitch dark and God knows what’s lurking in there. Might even be one of your damned kinnaras,” Tanvi said.

“This is a very stressful situation,” Narain began. “Tanvi’s logic is sound. We don’t even have a torch.”

“You believed me when I told you I saw our son, didn’t you? I am asking you to do the same again,” Shamitha said. “That is the path we

must take."

"Come on, guys, we must leave right now," Aakash pleaded with the group.

The noise of jangling steps heading their way reached a fever pitch.

Narain studied Shamitha's pleading eyes, and it melted his heart. He sighed and said to the others, "We are going that way."

"Screw that. Let's move," Tanvi said, entering the well-lit subway.

Aakash hesitated for a moment before saying, "Good luck. I don't know what this is, but I sure hope to see you both again."

Then he disappeared after his wife.

Screeches and hoots erupted from nearby as Shamitha and Narain took the path of darkness.

Chapter 16

"Tanvi, what is going on?" Aakash asked as he hastened behind, trying to keep up with her.

Tanvi said nothing but continued walking briskly through the tunnel system.

A combination of musty and earthy odours assailed their senses. Only the sound of their breathing accompanied them on this scary journey.

The smooth and cold walls, which were covered in indecipherable scripts, looked ancient. However, it was so well-crafted that one might be forgiven for thinking that modern machinery was employed to create the network of underground passages.

"I don't hear them any more," Aakash said, referring to the sounds of the chasing mob.

"Good. I knew we had made the right choice," Tanvi said.

Aakash latched onto Tanvi's arm and said, "What do you think is happening here?"

"I don't know. We just need to keep moving till we escape this hell hole," Tanvi said anxiously.

They advanced, assisted by the radiant azure stones implanted every few metres along the wall.

A metallic clink drew Aakash's attention to the floor.

Rusting metal pieces lay strewn on the floor beneath their bare feet.

"These look like prehistoric weapons. Like the ones you see in museums," he said.

"We don't have time for an archaeological tour, Aakash. Keep moving," Tanvi said.

"Where to? We have been walking for ages," he said.

“This has to end somewhere,” Tanvi said.

No sooner had she uttered those words than they came to a junction where the path split off into two, one lit and the other unlit.

“Left?” Aakash said, pointing at the lit tunnel.

Tanvi nodded.

Her very first step caused the floor to crumble and forced her feet into a shallow hole.

A scrunching noise followed by Tanvi’s pained scream echoed through the shaft.

“What happened?” Aakash enquired in a panicked voice, as he studied the pit.

A bloodied spearhead poked out through Tanvi’s left foot. Blood streamed out of the wound in rivulets.

Tanvi wailed as she held onto the walls. Her face was a mask of anguish.

“Stay calm, darling,” he said, squatting down to examine the injury.

Suddenly, Tanvi went quiet.

“Good darling. Well done. Let me see if I can move. . .” he began saying.

“Aakash. . .” Tanvi said in a fearful voice.

“I will be careful,” Aakash said.

“Aakash,” Tanvi said sternly. “Look up.”

A sense of unease settled over Aakash.

He lifted his head up and saw the monstrous figures surrounding them.

In the dim cerulean glow, they appeared as hulking silhouettes. And where the light fell, it revealed pallid flesh clustered with colonies of yellowing disease and dirty, tattered feathers. Mismatched pairs of chipped and tarnished gold jewellery adorned their malign forms.

Large yellow eyes were embossed on their avian heads, which featured malformed beaks and necrotic facial tissue. The talons on the ends of their spindly, pimple laden limbs glinted in the muted light.

Aakash gulped as he rose to his feet.

He couldn’t tell the numbers of the silent hideous shapes that had mobbed them.

Once he came to terms with the horrifying sight, the stench that rose from the cancerous bodies hit him with the force of a sledgehammer.

He dry-retched.

Tanvi let out a muted whimper. Aakash wanted to say something to reassure her that everything was going to be alright. But his throat

muscles tightened and he choked on the lie.

One creature let out a mocking bird laugh, which its companions echoed.

Aakash and Tanvi croaked out a pathetic cry in response, which soon transformed into a full-blown scream as the mysterious beings latched onto them with their claws.

Chapter 17

Shamitha and Narain navigated the dark passage using their hands. They were temporarily blinded as they crossed an inky-black ocean, each step taken as gingerly as a child taking its first steps.

They didn't speak. And the odd sound that echoed down the passageway startled them.

They heard screams at one point. The distant strains of a musical instrument.

"I hope our friends are okay?" Shamitha said.

"I am more worried about us floundering in the darkness," Narain said.

"Ashwath wants us to go this way," she said.

Narain snorted in frustration.

A chilly gust ripped through the darkness and made their naked bodies shiver.

The unsighted pair had been creeping forward for about five minutes when they came upon a junction that was dimly lit by a single luminous rock.

"Thank God for the light," she said. "The path splits in two."

"What do we do now?" Narain asked.

They waited for a while as she considered her next move.

Something furry brushed past Shamitha's legs, and she squealed.

"What's wrong?" Narain said, lurching towards her.

"I am alright," Shamitha said, sounding tearful.

Narain hugged her from behind.

"I am sorry I brought this upon us. If it wasn't for my wild fantasies,

you wouldn't be here," he said.

"Ma, ma." Her son's voice sounded as though it was filtered through a thick membrane.

She shushed her husband.

"I heard him again. We need to go left," Shamitha said.

Narain let out a sigh.

They left the island of light and fumbled along another dark path.

After a while, they noticed a blue glow in the distance.

They scrambled excitedly towards what appeared to be an open arched doorway.

"I don't know if you are hearing from our departed son, but you sure are in touch with our guardian angel," he admitted.

Shamitha chuckled. "I told you. Our dear son is guiding us to safety."

The possibility of escaping their subterranean prison filled them with hope.

They entered a rectangular chamber illuminated by hundreds of blue gemstones. The sound of water dripping punctuated its unsettling silence. A coppery scent wafted through the room.

At first glance, it appeared to be a storage area for pottery and ancient weaponry. Then their gaze was drawn to the enormous polished gold throne flanked by ornately chiselled pillars.

The throne room's walls were covered in murals depicting a visual history of the beings that ruled over this underworld kingdom.

The artwork featured bird-like creatures with anthropomorphic features, adorned with jewellery and silk, and bearing ornate weapons. It depicted them enjoying music and dancing in verdant gardens, and making love in forest ponds. It showed them battling demons and bowing to the might of the joyous lords of Swargaloka. Their heavenly masters showered them with gifts, including a mighty palace complex in the heart of a forest. The winged Lords reigned over earthlings like kings and queens from their palatial abode.

The bright colours of the illustrations turned dark as they showed the arrogant beings stealing a radiant weapon from the halls of heaven. Then it showed them being cast down from the clouds as the Gods glowered at them.

The beings then marched in a sorrowful procession to an underground sanctuary. The pariahs wore sad faces and hunched shoulders. Disease ravaged their feathers and their bodies, and their once regal features took on a monstrous aspect.

Shamitha gasped as she reached the end panel.

The final images showed their forest-dwelling human subjects trapping and dragging, screaming men and women towards their vile masters, who supervised the atrocities from under the shade of trees or in gloomy caves. The wicked masters rewarded the treacherous humans with glowing trinkets for their gory tributes.

The avian monsters skinned their victims without impunity. Then they offered the grisly remains to a radiant giant Worm-God that rose from the bowels of the planet.

Finally, the beings were depicted holding hands and sporting radiant smiles as a lucent ball of energy spat forth by their vermian deity cured their ailments, restoring their bodies and wings to their former glory.

“This makes me sick,” Narain said.

“Kinnaras, they are real,” Shamitha said breathlessly.

A rumbling noise rose from the earth and generated mild tremors that shook dust off the ceiling. Something creaked noisily on the wall, opposite to the throne.

Narain approached the section of the wall and studied it. Within moments, he noticed the outline of a door. A pedestal featuring a small Kinnara statue bearing a tall spear caught his attention. On a hunch, he twisted the sculpture to the right.

The doorway slid back and then to the side. It revealed an opening that framed a blue haze.

Shamitha placed a hand on Narain’s back, causing him to flinch.

They knew they were about to see something few humans had witnessed. The immensity of the moment hung over the room like a burial sheet.

They stepped forward and peered through the doorway.

It took a while for their eyes to adjust to the sights unfolding before them.

They gawked at the blue-lit underground kingdom of ramshackle buildings that stretched for miles. It was a replica of the ruins above ground, only this one seemed to be the handiwork of inferior builders.

Stalagmites and stalactites dotted the roof and floor of the cavernous district. Deep ravines hacked open wounds in the dangerous cityscape.

Initially, the place looked dead, but pockets of movement drew their attention to lanky figures mulling about the stonework and clusters of tents. They were also traversing the shanty towns via crude paths shaped out of the rocks. Bird calls, often tinged with anger or desperation, echoed across the domain and filled the human witnesses with dread. Discordant music from a string instrument added to the

eeriness.

"My God," Narain exclaimed.

Shamitha's mouth went dry, and she failed to articulate the horror and wonder she felt at the discovery.

The ground grumbled. More tremors rocked their balance.

"Look," Narain said, pointing into the distance.

A leviathan worm rose and sank into a canyon soundlessly. Its body was pale and ribbed. Two elephants put together would have struggled to make up the width of its slimy torso.

"No, no, no," Shamitha muttered, unable to comprehend the frightening sight she had just witnessed.

"That explains the tremors," Narain remarked.

Shamitha scanned the city in bewilderment. "This place. It is maddening."

"Let's go," Narain said, dragging her away from the doorway. "There has to be another way out of here."

He explored the walls that wound around the throne room, hoping to find another hidden door.

"Bingo," he said, pointing to the rectangular outline to the left of the throne.

Another pedestal. Another statue. This one featuring a Kinnara in full flight.

He said a prayer as he rotated the object clockwise.

Shamitha was the first to notice the strange grating noise to their right. From the corner of her eye, she spotted a secret panel filled with dark apertures sliding open on the wall.

Instinctively, she yanked her husband to the floor. Just as the new doorway opened up, a shower of arrows cut through the space where they previously stood. Their upper bodies would have been pincushioned with the deadly projectiles if Shamitha hadn't acted promptly.

The rush of adrenaline meant they could only hear their loud, panicked breaths. But once the shock subsided, night sounds emerging from the newly opened space came into sharp focus. The creak and groan of trees swaying in the wind. The earthy smell of leaves, rotting fruit, and floral bouquets. The cries of nocturnal animals.

They stood up and warily approached the doorway.

On the other side was a set of stairs that led to a metal grate, which opened up to the world above.

"We are getting out of here, my love," Narain said, a smile lighting

up his face.

A warning screech from behind them cut the moment short.

Narain's smile vanished as their hideous pursuers erupted out of the conduit that had originally transported the couple to the chamber.

Chapter 18

The gangly but powerful monstrosities that reeked of maladies dragged Aakash and Tanvi through the tunnels to a cavernous space thronged by hundreds of their pale-fleshed kinsfolk. They were covered in tatty feathers, and their backs featured leprous stumps that once hosted a pair of wings. Their bodies, which straddled human and avian forms, sported sores that housed wiggling worms and oozed pus. The abhorrent secretions had dried over and crusted their faded jewellery, leather accessories, and their soiled loincloths.

Tanvi's bile rose at the sight of the nightmarish coven.

During the journey, only the humans had screamed. The creatures marched along coldly, with the occasional chirp or caw to silence the captives. Even though their numbers had swelled, the same silent treatment continued in the rocky chamber.

The monstrous crowd sent shivers through Aakash and Tanvi as they were led to a raised platform featuring two ornately carved pillars that were set apart from each other.

Their faltering gait suggested the couple had accepted that resistance was futile. As they took their final steps onto the altar, their last shreds of courage and strength dissolved into despair.

Their captors pressed their spines against the chilly edifice and tied them to it with their hands behind their backs.

Above and around them, the cerulean rocks shone malignly, casting their cold light on the nauseating horrors that clicked their decaying beaks in anticipation. The maddening racket filled her with furious energy and elicited an animal roar from Tanvi.

Aakash felt drained. If he had an ounce of will, he too would have joined in. Instead, he wept silently as he watched his dear wife fight the realisation that they might die here, surrounded by these sickly beings.

Tanvi threw herself forward repeatedly. Her forceful struggles against the ropes dislocated one of her shoulders, causing her to shriek in pain.

Infuriated by the actions of the woman, one creature who bore a beautifully decorated club approached Tanvi. It glared at her face with its crazed bestial eyes before crunching the weapon into her right knee.

The sickening crack and the wail that followed echoed through the cavern, eliciting a joyous racket from the expectant masses.

“Stop. Don’t hurt my wife,” Aakash begged, thick ropes of saliva drooling out of his mouth.

The punisher covered her mouth with its pustulant palm to silence her. She bit hard, forcing the attacker to squeal and draw back its injured hand.

Sickly flesh hung loose from her lips. She immediately spat the abhorrent slice away and vomited yellow fluids.

The clacks grew louder as the crowd became more agitated.

“Stop,” Aakash pleaded. “Just stop.”

A hush fell over the crowd. The sea of bird-like monstrosities parted. A creature much taller than the others, thanks to its enormous feathered headdress, strolled towards the platform bearing a short ceremonial blade.

It stepped onto the stand, raised the weapon, and chirped. The audience fell to their knees and lowered their heads.

The Priest studied Aakash and Tanvi’s imprisoned forms with its cruel hooded eyes.

Compared to the others, the being was free of disease and retained their species’ true regal appearance. Its skin had a healthy reddish hue, and its face radiated an air of divinity and power. The plumage on its folded wings and on its body was smooth and clean, with bright blue hues. Its sharp beak was smooth, symmetrical, and the upper and lower bills were well aligned. Even its jewellery glittered and shined with newness.

A series of caws erupted from the mouth of the Priest, and the subservient crowd chirped in concert. The cacophony sent chills down the spines of the human captives.

The priestly figure pointed its knife first at Aakash and then Tanvi. It then lifted the knife up to the invisible heavens. It gazed up at the cluster of blue rocks, which resembled a glowing clump of spider eggs,

and trilled a prayer.

Goaded by screeches of delight from the worshippers, the shamanic monster marched towards Aakash.

“Don’t hurt him, please,” Tanvi begged weakly. Her leg was on fire thanks to the shattered kneecap.

She couldn’t comprehend that their pleasurable getaway had culminated in this never-ending, terrifying ordeal. She shook her head to banish the nightmare.

The terrifying shape of the Priest approached Aakash, who promptly wet his pants and mewled.

It tilted its head first to the left and then to the right, studying the quaking victim’s features with its savage yellow eyes.

A deep coo from its throat startled Aakash, who felt his bowels release its warm contents.

The Priest pressed a talon on Aakash’s forehead and followed this action by placing the tip of the knife next to it.

Then it sliced a crimson circle around his face to begin the extraction of his facial skin. Aakash’s pitiful screams accompanied the animated chittering of the audience, which moved closer to examine the minute details of the torture.

Tanvi prayed she would pass out so she wouldn’t have to witness the unfolding carnage.

The sadistic torturer carefully removed the skin and placed it on the floor.

It then turned its attention back to Aakash, whose flayed head lolled forward as he passed out from the unbearable pain.

The Priest grabbed a handful of dried and crushed leaves from the pouch attached to its stunningly engraved leather belt. It pushed Aakash’s head up and fed him the brownish mixture.

A buzz of energy surged through the injured man, and he was forced into a state of heightened awareness. The newly introduced stimulant ratcheted up the agony pulsing through his veins.

The priest nodded in satisfaction as he placed his talon on Aakash’s shoulder. Then, as before, the blade stripped the flesh off the shrieking man’s torso.

The hiss of the knife slicing into flesh and the agony on Aakash’s blood slick face, rich with veins, seared into Tanvi’s mind. The act of gruesome butchery stripped her of the ability to scream.

Aakash also grew quiet.

The handsome man she had met at an advertising conference in

London a decade ago; her enthusiastic travel partner who had joined her on her international escapades; a lover of theatre and the arts; a giver of mind-blowing pleasures; her anchor; and the man who had taught her to embrace freedoms without inhibitions—he was reduced to a blood-soaked illustration from an anatomy textbook.

Aakash's lidless eyes were now fixed in a permanent stare on the floor. He was gone.

When the unholy task was complete, the skin suit was laid out neatly on the floor to form the shape of a human body devoid of its innards. The Priest grabbed dried flowers from another pouch on his belt and showered it on the morbid display.

Its ghastly attendants stepped forward and removed the body from the pillar. Then the corpse was thrown to the teeming masses, who jumped on it like hungry carrion birds.

Tanvi understood that the bloody cadaver was akin to prasad offered after a ritual.

The Priest screeched at the ravenous throng. They halted their feeding frenzy. It was as if he was admonishing them for consuming too much of the sacred flesh.

He squalled again, and his assistants stepped forward and carried away Aakash's unrecognisably ravaged body.

"Where are you monsters taking him?" Tanvi asked tearfully.

The kinnaras fixed her with a murderous stare and did not offer a response.

A rumbling sound in the distance. Tanvi sensed convulsions underfoot. She imagined a gargantuan being burrowing, just behind the walls of the cave system.

Tanvi wept as she bid farewell to her husband. Before the last strands of reasoning in her mind succumbed to madness, she said, "Goodbye, my love."

The Priest sharpened the knife against the pillar coated in Aakash's body fluids. Its magnificent headdress plumes swayed every time it used rhythmic strokes to sharpen the blade.

A satisfied bellow erupted in the distance, as if the gift offered to some vast god of the deep had pleased it. Dust rained down from the cave ceiling, anointing Tanvi and preparing her for the rite.

When she noticed the Priest stalking towards her, she accepted that it was her turn to suffer.

She focused on the clicking chorus of mutated beaks as talon and weapon resumed their gory work on her frame, which had once been a

temple of pleasure.

Chapter 19

The sight of his naked, defenceless wife withering under the searing gaze of the monsters fuelled Narain's fury. He searched for something to fend off the malformed beasts.

His gaze was drawn to the many spears resting within a tall earthenware jar nearby.

He grabbed a few in a flash and handed one to Shamitha.

They dusted off the grime that had accumulated on the weapons. The sturdy wooden shaft was wrapped in weathered leather strips. The leaf-shaped blade's sharpness had not faded. Narain's two spears were shorter and lighter than the one Shamitha held, possibly a javelin designed to be thrown at the enemy.

Their enemies—all eight of them—could have intervened. But they opted to observe with amusement.

Shamitha noticed a spark of arrogance in their corrupt eyes.

"You are getting out of here," Narain said to her.

Shamitha noted he said 'you', not 'we'.

"I want you to back out of that door, go up the stairs and run like crazy," Narain said.

"I am not going anywhere with you," she said.

"We have one shot at this. I want you to listen to me. Move right now," he said.

"No. We either go together or. . ." she began saying.

"Or we rot together inside this cave. What foolishness is this?" he retorted.

The creatures started at the change in his tone.

Husband and wife thrust their weapons forward in response.

Their enemies took a slight backward step.

“Leave. Now,” he said to his wife without looking at her.

Shamitha flinched at his voice—not the tone, but the implications of what he was saying.

He was going to sacrifice himself for her.

“I don’t want you to tarry. If you love me, listen to me,” he begged, his voice faltering.

“I can’t. . .” she began saying.

“You have to. You must live,” he said.

“I have lost too much,” she said.

One of the kinnaras squawked and rushed forward.

Narain flung a spear at it, impaling it through the chest.

Putrid fluids erupted from its flesh, filling the room with the stench of rotten eggs.

Narain took the opportunity to grab another shorter spear.

“Give me yours,” Narain said, swapping one of his spears for her longer weapon. “Now, go.”

“I. . .” she said.

“Now,” he screamed.

The kinnaras, realising that their human playthings meant business, retrieved their weapons. Ornately decorated knives, swords, maces, and axes emerged from their sheaths and scabbards. Their sharp edges glinted in the blue light as the monstrosities stalked forward.

Shamitha briefly touched Narain’s shoulder as she backed into the exit route.

Her husband did not turn to bid her farewell. His sight was fixed on the advancing enemies. His hands gripped the two spears, and he delivered short, quick thrusts to dissuade the attackers from creeping up on him.

The kinnaras made the first move.

Narain’s long spear plunged into the closest enemy before its axe blow could crack his skull open. The injured creature screeched and reeled away in pain.

Narain hurled the short spear at a sword bearer rushing at him and left it spread-eagled on the floor, the spear jutting out of its throat.

He now held the long spear with both hands and confronted the assailants, his face a determined mask.

Shamitha dashed up the short flight of steps and pushed against the grate that provided access to the forest above.

The sounds of violent struggle from below filled her with utter horror and clashed with the nocturnal sounds of the forest seeping through the metal frame.

She attempted many times to open the grill, but it would not budge. Her stomach fell.

"No, no, no," she uttered as she searched for a latch or a lock.

Nothing.

She attempted to lift the gill with all her power, as if she were executing a shoulder press with a huge barbell in her gym.

A painful wail followed by a frantic flurry of stabs and slashes reached her ears. Squawks and shrieks, mixed with muted human screams, signalled the cave dwellers' victory over her beloved husband. The cold floor trembled beneath her as the beginnings of a mournful cry choked her.

"You must escape. You must live." Narain's words resonated in her ears.

Ignoring the massive wave of grief ready to crash down on her trembling frame, she stabbed the spear point into the side of the grill and attempted to pry it open.

It gave way. She wedged it up just as Narain's death cry rang out from behind her.

She added her might to the leverage created by the spear and shoved the grill open, letting it slam on to the moonlit forest floor.

Heavy footfalls behind her drew her attention. The usually light-footed creatures were eager to drag her back into the blue tinged horror-scape. She turned to find one of the kinnaras cawing at her in alarm at the bottom of the steps. Its companions mobbed behind it, eager to get their talons into her.

The anger over her husband's brutal murder powered her throw. The spear plunged into the face of the feathered freak charging at her.

The impaled creature plunged down the stairs and bowled over the others, toppling them like skittles and creating a temporary chokepoint.

She made use of the break to clamber up and onto the forest floor. She then reinstalled the grating, closing off the exit point.

A cool breeze raised gooseflesh on her nude form. The wilderness evoked a profound sense of vulnerability in her. Only the beatific moon offered a quantum of solace.

This was no time to succumb to the fear of what lurked in the verdure under the cover of night. Suddenly, the irate shrieks of the creatures rang out from below the earth and gave her the impetus she

needed to make a safe getaway.

She searched her surroundings for something to weigh down the metal barrier. She saw a giant rock that would have been ideal, but it was too heavy for her to move alone.

Then she spotted a thick fallen log. She rolled it forward, and it did so without complaint.

She placed it on the grate just as the kinnaras began assaulting the barrier with their weapons to breach their temporary prison.

She scanned the four directions. Eventually, she spotted the lights of the resort in the distance.

Her heart was thundering in her chest as she bolted.

Narain's final, heart-breaking pleas of capitulation as they chopped him to pieces rang in her head, as she ran through the undergrowth, crying.

Shamitha thought she heard the frenzied rustling of leaves behind her, but it may have been her imagination. She was worried that long, sickly arms would seize her shoulders and return her to that dark realm of unholy rites to appease the whims of evil gods.

Sharp branches and thorns stung her exposed skin. Adrenaline surged through her as her fleeing body negotiated the difficult terrain.

The external lights of the resort beckoned.

She knew she was running from one source of danger to another, given the treacherous conduct of the hosts. But she needed to evade their malign surveillance and grab the car keys from their room, and, if possible, her phone from the office.

She had no intention of putting herself in greater danger. Her number one priority was to get out of this hell-hole—the purpose that inspired Narain's ultimate sacrifice.

She prayed she didn't fall into a pit or attract the venomous fangs of serpents hiding in the vegetation as she raced towards her destination.

As she got closer to the building, she reduced her pace before coming to a complete stop.

She crouched behind some bushes and inhaled deeply. She needed the big lungfuls of oxygen to power her next steps.

As she studied the garden and the kitchen door that overlooked it, she slowed her breathing. There was no movement.

"Go," she whispered, willing her body to begin the dangerous mission.

She was tiptoeing across the garden bed towards the kitchen entrance when she heard voices.

She sneaked up and hid behind a wheelbarrow stacked with fertiliser bags.

She could not see Rishabh and Devika when they came out of the kitchen. Only their repulsive words reached her ears.

“Did you grab everything?” Rishabh asked.

“Yes. Yes, I did. How many times are you going to ask me the same question?” Devika said irritably.

“Just to be sure. You know how grumpy those things get if we don’t perform the ritual properly. And let’s admit it, you are a forgetful woman,” he said.

“Shut up,” Devika said.

Two figures dressed in red robes and carrying rucksacks came into Shamitha’s field of view. The sight enraged her.

Her body, which had previously begged for survival, now pleaded for vengeance to be exacted on the wretches who had condemned her husband to a horrible end.

The vile couple were still bickering as they headed down the path that had taken Shamitha to the ruins. Devika flicked on a torch as she led their journey into the heart of the forest. Rishabh was scattering petals on the ground, which he grabbed from a wicker basket as they embarked on the short pilgrimage.

Rage pulsed in Shamitha’s veins as she considered the possibility that Rishabh and Devika were headed to the well to receive the blessings of their wicked overlords. She wondered what reward they would seek for their dastardly act.

Shamitha exited her hiding spot. She entered the building through the unlocked back door and headed straight to her room.

She caught sight of her naked, battered form in a mirror. Her eyes were devoid of life.

Once she was in her room, she scanned the remnants of the relationship she once had with a beautiful man with the kindest eyes in the world. Narain’s scent lingered in the room. The sight of his clothes made her weep.

“No. Stop,” she commanded. “This is no time to wilt.”

She quickly put on a t-shirt, chinos, and her running shoes, and secured the car keys in one of her pockets.

Her body was in charge of the preparations to escape, but her mind was set on vengeance.

She exited the room after offering it a final hesitant glance. Her past was dead. The room was a sarcophagus that housed its withered

remains.

She entered Rishabh's office.

It was a neatly appointed room with vintage wooden furniture and tall bookshelves lined with ancient texts. Its walls featured art and artefacts from the caves below.

She searched for her phone but could not find it.

A small iron safe box was installed on the wall.

She tried the handle. It didn't budge.

She had no hope of unlocking it without the keys or the passcode. Her heart sank.

"Shit," she said as she sank into the leather office chair behind Rishabh's untidy desk.

Flustered, she peered around the room. Her eyes welled up.

Through the veil of tears, she caught sight of Rishabh's bolt action hunting rifle on the wall.

The amorphous plan to seek vengeance now took the shape of a well-honed weapon.

She grabbed the weapon from its rack.

She had watched enough nature documentaries and movies to understand how a bolt-action rifle functioned. She yanked the bolt back and examined the chamber for rounds.

It was loaded and ready. She pictured gunshots pulverising the crooks who had bereaved her.

She rushed out of the office, pushing the bolt back to its locked position.

She was just about to enter the kitchen when she heard a familiar voice uttering, "I knew that stupid bitch had forgotten something. Every time."

Shamitha and Rishabh found themselves face-to-face. Their faces registered shock.

Shamitha's entire being was fixed on the object of her hatred.

Rishabh sprung into action after what seemed like an age. He charged at her, attempting to crash tackle her.

Shamitha lifted the rifle and fired from her hip.

She halted Rishabh's progress despite her poor shooting form.

He reeled for a few moments before turning his attention to the left side of his belly, where a crimson flower blossomed.

He let out an animal-like shriek and pressed his palm against the spot.

"You filthy whore. You shot me," he brayed through the pain.

A furious Shamitha fired again. This time the shot missed, but it startled the injured man, who promptly fell onto his back.

He lay there dazed for a few seconds before flipping onto his belly and crawling towards the door. He trailed a rich brushstroke of blood.

Shamita followed him silently, gun pointed at his back, as he exited the room and crawled down the steps leading to the garden, like a clumsy snake.

The resort owner groaned as he pulled himself forward with great effort.

“I hope you feel the same pain my Narain felt when those wretched creatures butchered him,” Shamitha said.

A fresh voice interrupted the drama playing out in the garden.

Devika burst out of the woods shouting, “They are angry, Rishabh. They are not happy. Something went wrong. They chased me.”

She skidded to a halt when she saw what was happening.

She gaped at Shamitha and then at her wounded partner. Her face twisted in agony as she beheld his plight.

“No. What did you do to him?” she cried.

Rishabh hauled himself towards his partner.

“Devi. . .ka,” he said in a ragged voice.

Devika charged towards him, ignoring Shamitha’s rifle.

She fell to her knees and scooped her life partner into her arms.

“Where are you hurt?” She asked.

“I shot him in the belly, if you really must know. Hurts, doesn’t it?” Shamitha said, looking at the moaning man spitefully.

Rishabh let out a pitiful cry as he sank into his lover’s arms. Devika was beside herself.

“Imagine our terror, our pain in those dark caves. Those things . . .” Shamitha’s voice trailed off as she fought back tears.

“Where are Aakash and Tanvi?” Shamitha asked the hysterical woman.

She looked up with her tear-streaked face and shook her head.

“Sacrificed. By those things,” Shamitha said, biting down on each word as she spoke.

Devika averted her glance.

Suddenly, the forest around them came alive.

Shamitha surveyed the verdure. She could see nothing at first. But then she spotted the damned forms of the kinnaras amongst the vegetation, watching the proceedings eagerly.

Shamitha breathed in deeply and closed her eyes.

“Why?” she said, jerking her eyes wide open.

“We discovered them accidentally when we were working on this place. They forgave our intrusion and spared our lives. We made a deal with them in return for their blessings. Their favours are delicious, delightful,” Rishabh said, coughing up blood.

Shamita flipped the rifle around, holding it by the forestock. She then took a few steps forward, so Devika’s profile was on her right side.

She sighed loudly. She noticed the kinnaras tense up as if they had caught on to her intentions.

Shamitha let out an earsplitting roar and repeatedly slammed the weapon into the woman’s back.

Devika screamed in agony every time the rifle’s butt shattered her bones.

The kinnaras watched on.

Several cracks later, her spine gave way, and Devika fell sideways like a freshly lopped tree. Her eyes bulged as she stared into the distance, as if she was willing her body to teleport to a distant haven. A constant whimper emanated from her pursed lips as she wrestled with the unbearable pain.

With her brutal work done, Shamitha glared at the watchers in the forest and shouted, “Here! This is what you want, isn’t it? Two bodies to replace two bodies. You butchered my husband mercilessly. His corpse might not be fit for your ceremony. Take this sack of shit instead. He is still intact. Mostly. And take his companion along and let me go. Her back might be broken, but her skin looks fresh for the reaping. Isn’t that what you do? I saw it in your disgusting paintings.”

The creatures silently glared at her without offering a response.

“Come, you sick fucks. Take them,” she continued. “And what are you going to give me in return? What blessings do I receive for offering these wretches to you? Can you give me my son back? What about my loving husband? What the fuck can you actually do?” Shamitha’s shrill voice rang through the forest.

She collapsed to her knees, sobbing uncontrollably.

All the corrosive sadness that had rotted her insides for years geysered out of her. The dreadful days in the hospital with her beloved Ashwath. The knowledge that her Narain would not warm her bed at night as she aged.

It was not until she heard shuffling sounds and glanced up that she realised the monstrosities were right by her, ready to drag Devika and Rishabh away. They seemed much more monstrous under the resort’s

external lighting. The sickness had robbed them of their divine features, leaving them as a malignant reminder for those who choose to disrespect the gods.

The kinnaras disregarded her seated form and dragged away the writhing bodies of her victims, who were wailing and pleading to be released.

“What about all the sacrifices we have offered you over the years?” Shamitha heard Rishabh plead for his case.

Blood had completely soaked his clothes, and he was in a weakened state, but the wily man tried to weasel his way out of the sordid fate that awaited him.

Devika opened and closed her mouth wordlessly, like a fish. Her vacant eyes had the look of someone who had resigned to their fate.

Within moments, the ghastly procession vanished into the forest, leaving Shamitha to mourn alone.

She sat there for ten more minutes, weighed down by the immensity of what had just transpired. Then she got up, leaving the gun beside her on the floor.

She tottered to her car, her head hung low, and climbed in.

The forest threatened to pour into the confines of the vehicle. She slammed the door shut and locked it, shutting out its lecherous intentions.

Even the fear of the darkness blanketing her surroundings could not bring her mind back to life. She felt drained.

She began driving along the gravel road that she knew might lead to a vacuous freedom.

She drove for what felt like several kilometres through the wilderness.

Once, when she glanced to her left, she half expected to see Narain sitting there with a smile.

“Eyes back on the road, missy. You have plenty of time to admire my good looks when we get back home,” he would have said.

A fog that rolled down from the hills reduced visibility. The headlights were struggling to pierce its stubborn presence.

She came dangerously close to colliding with a mass of dark shapes that abruptly materialised in front of her, blocking the way ahead.

She held her breath as feelings surged back into her nerves. Fear embraced her with its chilly arms.

‘It was foolish to expect they would let you go. Time to flee,’ her limbic brain said.

The mist thinned as a wind rose and shepherded the clouds deeper into the wilds. The LED lamps revealed the forms of the kinnaras. A dozen of them, unarmed. They watched her intently.

“What do you want now? Did you just let me go to give me false hope? So you can hunt me again, you fucked up bastards,” she said to no one in the car.

They did not move for what seemed like an eternity. Tension ached in and around her shoulders as she waited impatiently.

She honked at them.

They cocked their heads sideways and studied the car briefly before resuming their vigil.

Shamitha mentally prepared herself to drive through the horde.

She had just placed her foot on the accelerator when the mob parted and a small figure emerged from the throng.

It stepped into the light and revealed itself to be a human boy.

On closer inspection, his features seemed familiar to her.

She tracked him breathlessly as he walked to the passenger side of the car and tried to open the door.

As the boy struggled with the handle, recognition dawned on Shamitha.

‘Is this an illusion to trick me?’ she wondered.

The boy looked upset as he stepped back from the door.

“No. It can’t be,” she muttered.

Throwing caution to the wind, Shamitha disengaged the lock, leaned over, and pushed open the door.

The boy stepped forward.

They both stared at each other before a smile of recognition blossomed collectively on their lips.

“Come, darling,” Shamitha said.

Ashwath climbed into the car seat.

He did not have bald spots on his head or black bags beneath his eyes. His grin was as dazzling as the sun.

He was not the kid she had laid to rest. He was from the time before that awful disease sapped all of his vigour.

He resembled the bundle of energy that tore up the grounds of Don Bosco School—the chatterbox who kept her entertained during their trips to the mall.

“Ma,” he called out to his slack-jawed mother.

Shamitha unbuckled her seatbelt and hugged him close to her chest.

She took in the sweet scent of his hair and knew it was her beautiful

boy.

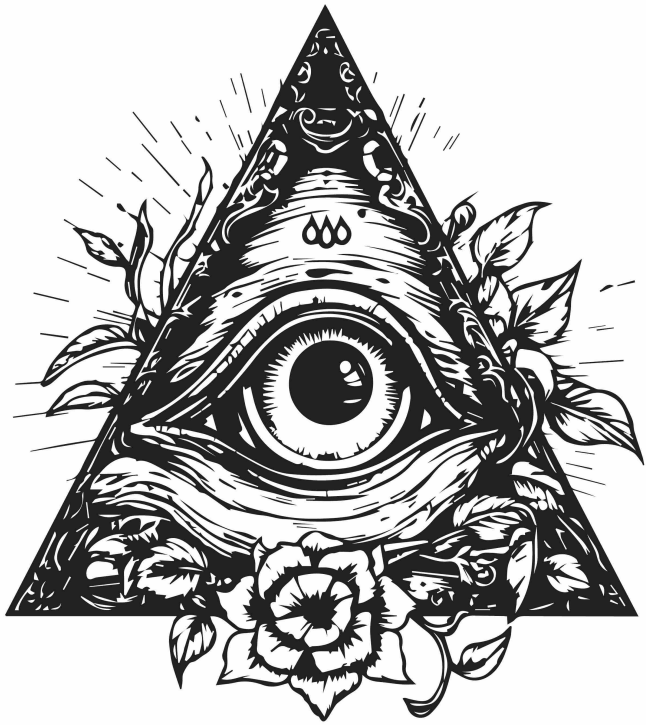
A sob broke free from her lips.

The warmth of their embrace radiated outward, comforting her mind, healing her broken body, even as the tears streamed freely from her eyes.

Shamitha turned to face the road ahead, even as she stroked her son's back.

It was empty. The kinnaras had returned to their cursed abode to continue their penance; to persist with their rituals to appease the dweller in the darkness.

Shamitha put the seatbelts on Ashwath and herself. Then she drove on, hoping for the sight of dawn.



DARKSOME REMEDY

Chapter 1

"He must meet the Black Man, and go with them all to the throne of Azathoth at the centre of ultimate Chaos."

H. P. Lovecraft
"The Dreams in the Witch House"

Inevitably, this *pennukaanal* (the pre-wedding ritual of the groom and his family visiting a prospective bride) too would end in failure for Roshan. It was also fated that someone would remark about the early onset of his baldness as a cause for the rejection.

Ramya was blunt when she confessed to him in the confines of her room that she had never found him attractive.

"I had told them when I saw your photograph initially not to bother with this visit," she said sheepishly. "But they insisted, saying that a photograph is never a good representation of what someone actually looks like."

Roshan pulled down his shirt, as if to shield himself from the humiliating words.

He skirted the comment to ask about her sketches on the wall.

"Well done," he said as he got up from the rickety chair. "You must keep drawing."

He exited the room and hurriedly ushered his stunned family members—his mother, two uncles, and a cousin—out of the residence.

As they walked towards the bus stop, he heard a hushed conversation between his maternal uncle and the marriage broker. "This is the 23rd

one ending in failure. Is it possible for you to find him a suitable match, or should we get a new broker?" he said angrily.

"What can I do, sir? The ladies these days want Shahrukhs and Salmans. With a head like that. . ." the broker grovelled.

Roshan focused on the crunching gravel underneath his feet as he swept a palm across his head. He encountered thinning hair swept across the scalp in a comb-over, smooth sections where the hair was completely missing, and rough patches where dry, flaky scales crusted the surface. Over the years, he had tried many ointments (herbal and western) and pills to counter the vicious pestilence ravaging his scalp. But like a stubborn traitorous populace refusing to quell its insurrection, the condition clung to him, slowly eroding his confidence and joy.

Not that he didn't have redeeming features. He had unblemished skin, an alluring smile that revealed perfectly straight teeth, and eyes that sparkled with intelligence. He was intelligent and held a good position at a successful accounting firm. He was also well liked by his family, colleagues, and members of society. However, despite his many admirable qualities, the women and their guardians could not look past his hair loss.

The hurt inflicted on his soul manifested as a throbbing pain in his temples. He was determined not to shed tears in front of his relatives. He would do that in his room.

As the bus stop came into view, he sensed his mother Sudha's sad gaze on the back of his head.

Chapter 2

Roshan hated Mondays, like most people. The bitter commentary on his baldness and the rejection over the weekend made it worse than usual. He couldn't pay attention to his work. Thankfully, he had a quiet day, as the firm had just come out of the hectic tax filing season.

He left early that day, hoping to catch a movie by himself. He didn't care what he watched, as long as it was not too crowded and he could distract his mind with popcorn and colourful on-screen happenings.

On the way to the theatre, he saw an enormous billboard that was a larger replica of the ads popping up around the city for a herbal hair growth medicine named 'Black Magic'. It had apparently helped millions of bald men and women attain a full head of hair. Featuring the grinning visage of a famous Bollywood star, the billboard also showcased several before-and-after shots of satisfied customers.

While Roshan had paid thousands for similar snake-oil treatments in the past and had sworn off them, there was something mesmerising about the ad that he couldn't put his finger on. Shades of sickly yellow, aggressive violet, hurtful blue, and mesmerising green created an unnatural palette of colours on the canvas, like an oil slick cast against the cityscape. It seemed to swirl and ripple with pleasing energies. Roshan attributed this effect to nifty graphic design and printing techniques.

He heard what he assumed was his inner voice calling out to him.

"Worth a try," it hissed.

He rubbed his hands as he scanned the billboard, trying to decide.

There were expensive hair transplant surgeries available in foreign

countries, but he couldn't afford them. He needed to find affordable and effective options that would suit his budget and were closer to home. Yet, he was hesitant to sign up for another treatment program with high hopes, only to have them dashed again. After all, there is only so much disappointment one can handle.

He shook his head and drew his eyes away from the advertisement and headed towards the cinema. Little did he know, a figure in a black suit and wide-brimmed hat was observing him from the shadows of a nearby storefront.

Chapter 3

Sudha was engrossed in her favourite soap opera while Roshan was polishing his shoes when the Black Magic ad appeared on the television. A man of Roshan's age was shown in the ad, providing a testimonial about how the pills had transformed his life. Now that he looked closely, the man vaguely resembled Roshan, with a similar pattern of baldness.

"I was shunned. Considered unattractive. I even contemplated suicide," said the man in the advertisement as they showcased his depressed-looking polaroids.

"But then the pills transformed my life," he suddenly declared to upbeat music, his head now featuring lustrous natural looking hair.

The picture stuttered and Roshan thought he saw the outline of a face on the TV for a brief second. "Say yes," it mouthed wordlessly before vanishing.

It was so quick that Roshan dismissed it as an optical illusion.

The ad must have reminded his mother of the insult they had suffered over the weekend, because she suddenly remarked spitefully, "Girls, these days are so vain. Fools, the lot of them."

"Call us on 1300333333," the ad encouraged viewers.

Roshan stood up and exited the room, chafing at being reminded of the painful memory.

He went to the bathroom and looked in the mirror. He was disgusted with his comb-over, which he had carefully crafted to protect his fragile confidence. The light from the bulb above shone off his bald crown beneath the thin wisps of hair and mocked him like a blazing star

behind the bars of a cage. You cannot hide the shame, it declared wordlessly.

He saw in the mirror a weaker representation of manhood, one that wouldn't entice a woman to mate with him.

Roshan imagined having a full head of hair like the man in the ad. This version of Roshan was not a skinny wimp. He was an Adonis, with a barrel chest, bulging muscles, wide shoulders, and a sharp jawline.

But the image died out, leaving him with the truth, mocking his reveries.

Roshan cleansed his hands and face, then patted himself dry with a towel. He took one final glance in the mirror before leaving the room.

Later that night, he read the newspaper, since he was always time poor in the morning. He found it to be a very relaxing method to unwind before heading to bed.

He sat on the porch in a wicker chair, reading the updates from the Indian cricket team's tour of New Zealand. The relentless night-time buzzing of insects came to a halt when he noticed a print ad for 'Black Magic', which boldly proclaimed, 'Banish baldness. Bring back your mojo.'

The Bollywood actor in the ad was beaming as he held a dozen obsidian pills in the palm of his hand.

'Call us at 1300333333 and leave a message. A salesperson will contact you immediately.'

Roshan looked up from the paper and gazed at the trees in the distant grove, lost in thought. Then he stood up and walked to his landline.

If Roshan had the night vision of a nocturnal bird, he would have spotted a dark figure amongst the trees watching him, grinning with delight.

Chapter 4

The next morning, just as Roshan was about to leave for his office, he received a call from the pharmaceutical company. The salesperson on the line had a pleasant radio voice and informed Roshan that due to high demand, they could only send someone to him on Sunday. Roshan accepted the offer and took the news of the product's popularity as a good sign.

After an uneventful work week, Roshan made his usual monthly pilgrimage on Saturday to visit his father at the mental hospital.

As he entered the maze of the British-era building, the aroma of disinfectant, the clamour of patients, the scuffed linoleum flooring, and the green-hued lighting welcomed him like an old friend. An orderly accompanied Roshan to the recreation room where his father played carrom with fellow patients.

Sushil's wrinkled face, covered in age spots, lit up when he saw his son. He stood up gingerly and pointed to an empty couch near the tall barred windows.

Over the last year, his father's physical and mental condition had improved. A sense of dignity had returned to his person. His once bony shoulders and sunken chest had filled out thanks to his increased willingness to eat three meals a day. As psychotic episodes had become far and few, the doctors had approved more leisure time and the opportunity to mingle with others.

The orderly bid Roshan farewell, but others dressed in navy-blue uniforms watched the volatile occupants in the room.

Father and son sat across from each other and exchanged greetings.

“How are you, son?” Sushil asked in a placid tone.

Roshan felt a tinge of sadness as he updated his father on news from the outside world. Despite the improvements, his father, who was admitted to the institution five years ago would probably never leave. An attack on his mother, days before his father was committed to the clinic, and a few violent incidents during his stay, had sealed his fate. His symptoms could only be managed under close and expert supervision. Outside of these four walls, he was a ticking time bomb.

His mother could not bring herself to see Sushil, which he understood. But he lamented his father’s absence from their everyday life.

Sushil listened to his son attentively and spoke up only once. When Roshan informed him about the pennukanal incident, he consoled him and shared some wise words on how judgemental people can be. His mental illness had gifted him great insights into how the world perceived people who were different; people who didn’t measure up to their standards of beauty or ‘normalcy’.

Roshan grabbed a glass of water for his father when he said he was thirsty. He chatted about the new hair-growth treatment he was considering.

“Just like your medication has been helping you, I hope this one gives me a full head of hair. It has a fancy name too—Black Magic,” Roshan said, grinning.

Sushil spat the liquid he was consuming and slammed the glass against the coffee table. A succession of painful spasms contorted his face.

Roshan gripped the couch as he sat up in alarm.

The change in his father’s demeanour was almost instant. It was as if an unseen force had descended into his soul and altered his being.

“Do you hear the piping of the infernal flute?” Sushil said.

“What did you say?” Roshan asked.

“Maybe it’s too early. Soon you will hear the malign piping,” his father said, a broad, insane grin tearing up his previously serene face.

“What do you mean, Acha?” Roshan said.

“The maddening drums will grace your ears soon. And the black ooze will flow freely. Gifts will be given and fealty will be demanded,” he continued.

Sushil’s limbs flailed and his torso jerked wildly. He mumbled sentences that sounded like nonsense verse as his face twisted into a scowl.

“His dancers have failed. He has awoken, and his intent bleeds through the tears in space and time,” his father rambled.

Roshan stood up and looked at the orderly, who started forward.

His father hooted, startling Roshan. Then he sprang up and slapped himself repeatedly on the cheeks. The loud smacks drew the attention of the others in the room.

He continued drumming his face rhythmically with his open palms, his eyes darting between his fellow patients. It was as if he was transmitting a coded message through the smacks and the crazed intensity of his gaze. It served as a clarion call to their dormant tics and hysterical behaviours.

Soon, the room was a circus of tormented beings removed from reality, their medicated states suppressed to welcome a carnival of mania and phobias. The shrieking patients swung and leapt around the room like wild animals and bared their teeth at those who dared to impede their maddening movements. An impromptu band of musicians playing imaginary flutes lined up against a wall, orchestrating the madness with inaudible strains of unsettling music.The orderlies, realising they needed more bodies in the room to restore order, got on their radios and requested assistance. They intervened minimally while they waited for backup.

Roshan’s skin crawled as he watched the terrifying spectacle playing out before him. The crazed actions of the patients did not seem random. It was as if they were recreating the infernal sights of a throne room from some wretched corner of hell.

He was caught unawares when someone leapt on his back and placed him in a chokehold. He crashed into the couch with his attacker on his back. The forearm that crushed his windpipe compromised his ability to breathe.

Shadows crawled in from the corners of his sight, and for a brief moment, he saw a nebulous cloud in space that surged forth like a gargantuan worm tunnelling through jet black darkness, a trillion sharp teeth gracing its sphincter mouth.

A tangle of muscular limbs descending on Roshan interrupted the vision. An orderly yanked the assailant away from Roshan, but not before he delivered a warning through clenched teeth. “Blind but infinitely wise. You should join the horde, son. His patience is finite.”

Roshan’s saviour ushered him out of the room, allowing only a quick glance back. Roshan’s heart broke at the sight of his father prostrating before the capering flute players, spitting repeatedly on the floor as he

raised and lowered his head.

Chapter 5

The man, who referred to himself as the Night Salesman, arrived at eight minutes past seven on a Sunday evening. He wore a black hat and a neatly pressed black suit. Roshan attributed his odd timing to the growing popularity of Black Magic and the demands placed on the staff.

The Salesman's eyes occasionally peeped out of the shadow of the brim of his hat, harbouring an air of illness; a sense of wrongness. He sporadically pressed his unusually thin fingers against his pasty skin, which bore tiny, spidery black veins, as if he was dabbing perspiration.

His unfortunate appearance could easily be chalked up to an accident or a bout of illness. Roshan had a distant cousin who was a victim of a factory fire. It had taken years for him to recover from the burns, and the final product of that transformation was an amalgam of repulsive physical features. The visitor reminded him of that cousin.

The Night Salesman confirmed Roshan's suspicion, apologising profusely with a thin-lipped mouth below his skeletal nose. When he spoke, his dark lips showcased chiclet teeth and his voice came out in a hiss.

"I prefer working at night anyway, owing to my skin condition," he said.

"If I had a choice, I would prefer the same. I am more of a night person," Roshan replied.

The Salesman's tiny square teeth glistened as he smiled.

Despite his unsettling appearance and demeanour, which would have made most people uncomfortable, Roshan sensed a connection with this maimed soul.

“Take a seat. I will get some tea for you,” Roshan said.

“I am so sorry, but I have to decline your offer. I am on the clock. Our sales have skyrocketed like an ISRO rocket over the last few months, and I am swamped delivering these life-changing products,” the Salesman said.

“Glad to hear. I hope it works miracles for me,” Roshan said.

The Night Salesman opened his leather satchel and produced a minimalist white package, which featured the name ‘Black Magic’ and the expiry date.

“Oh,” Roshan said, taken aback. “I was hoping to ask some questions before. “We believe our product speaks for itself. Here is a one-month pack. If you have questions about the pills, give us a call. If you don’t see any results, forget we ever met, get on with your life. But if you do and want to sign up for the longer treatment plan, call us. You know the number. . .” the Salesman said.

“Yes. 1300333333. I have seen so many ads for the product, I think I can recite the number in my sleep,” Roshan chuckled.

“Great,” the Salesman hissed through his broad grin. “Our product has minimal side effects. It’s based on decades of research, and we stand by the purity of its ingredients. I am 100% certain you will see results.”

“Fingers crossed,” Roshan said.

The Salesman stepped down from the porch, touched his hat’s brim and said, “Good night and good luck.”

Roshan stood there, watching the man hobble away into the distance. It wasn’t until he was out of sight that he realised he had never once enquired about the man’s name.

Chapter 6

It was on the third day that Roshan started noticing the effects of the medication. Hair did not magically appear on his crown, but he felt a fresh burst of energy and joy in his life.

His mother commented on how happy he appeared.

He felt like he was walking on air. Life played out more vividly before his eyes.

People were nicer to him. He definitely noticed more women stealing looks at him, a favour he returned with seductive smiles.

“The Night Salesman might be onto something,” he thought. “Now for a full head of hair.”

That night, he had the most beautiful dream.

Roshan and his formless lover were seated on a comfortable, woven blanket, their gazes riveted on the sky above. The Milky Way was a cosmic ribbon of glittering light that seemed to run indefinitely through the cosmos. The sparkling stars blinked on a dark canvas and thrummed with soul-nourishing energies.

In that moment, everything was blissful, and Roshan wished he could hold on to it forever.

He only wished he could see his lover’s features.

Every time he turned to look at her, some enchantment imposed on his senses kept him from feasting on her beauty.

“Soon. Everything will be revealed. Your fortunes will shift, and your sad past will become a distant memory,” the dark shape that sat beside him said.

Roshan sank deeper into the illusion, comforted by the words.

Chapter 7

New hair grew because of his medication regimen. However, Roshan's pleasant dreams transformed into nightmares. In fact, the more hair he had, the worse his dreams became.

Every day he looked in the mirror, Roshan saw patches of healthy jet-black hair sprouting on what had once been a barren wasteland. He loved running his hand over the soft and strong hair that grew longer by the day. He relished the velvety new growth and the newfound confidence to conquer the world.

He rejoiced every waking moment. But he feared the night. He dreaded the nightmares that wrenched him into its murky depths, leaving him nervous and fatigued at daybreak.

His dreams smelled of briny seawater and burning metal, and were set on a vast beach clouded by a noxious black fog, under a terrifying night sky full of uncatalogued stars that coruscated malignly. He wandered the vast expanse, occasionally stepping on sharp shells that cut his feet, looking for an exit.

Suddenly, the carnival music of the damned started playing in the distance. He ran in the opposite direction—a fatal mistake that set him on a collision course with a nameless and shapeless being emerging from the fog. This creature that defied logic, dragged its massive body across the sand towards him. A primal terror gripped Roshan, threatening to rend his sanity to pieces.

The disturbing music in the distance grew louder as if it was heralding and celebrating the arrival of the suzerain of infinite terror; a devourer of dimensions and time.

Roshan sensed a cluster of million eyes studying him from within the cover of the fog, and the appraisal fouled all goodness in him. His insignificance in the cold, dark universe dawned on him with the force of a sledgehammer strike.

A clamorous, capering horde of indescribable shapes sprinted along the shell-littered beach towards him, shattering exoskeletons under their cloven hooves. Roshan desperately wanted to be teleported back to his real life and escape this nightmare trap, but he was no longer in control of his fate.

The dark clouds now covered heaven and earth, and Roshan could make out the outline of something gargantuan rearing up from the beach and kissing the sky, as lightning bolts lit up the smoky shroud.

A command composed of three words boomed in the air from a million gaping maws covered in mucus. “Submit. Prepare. Await.”

The heinous order drove Roshan back to reality. He woke up gasping for oxygen.

The nightmares were now a daily ritual. Roshan convinced himself that the shocking encounter with his father had caused these recurring dreams. He had not told his mother about the incident at the asylum.

Every day, as he drank a glass of cold water to shake off the lingering effects of the horrifying dreamscape, he considered confiding in Sudha. He hoped this confession would permanently liberate him from the debilitating night terrors. But then the euphoria of the day would take his mind off his troubles and the cycle repeated.

Chapter 8

Roshan's anxiety about the pennukanal ceremony vanished as soon as he arrived at Renu's home with his family members.

"She is a jewel," the marriage broker had announced inappropriately, when he first brought the proposal to Sudha.

The broker was not exaggerating. The stunning 28-year-old civil engineer worked at the city corporation as an advisor. Graciousness radiated from her and her cultured family members, who welcomed the entourage as if they were their own.

Renu filled the two-storied home that bordered a green paddy field with musical instruments she had mastered over the years.

"Wow, I can't even whistle properly," Roshan confessed.

Renu, dressed in a gorgeous blue sari, brought tea and treats for the invitees on a tray.

"Did you make the fried plantains?" Sudha asked.

"I did," Renu said.

"He is an excellent cook too," Sudha remarked, pointing to her son.

Roshan smiled shyly as he looked around.

He retained the same shyness when he walked into Renu's room to have a private conversation with her.

They spoke at length about each other's passions and their dreams for the future.

Renu wanted to complete her bachelor's degree in music therapy, which she was doing part time. She aspired to use her musical skills to help those suffering from mental illnesses one day.

Just listening to her mellifluous voice filled Roshan's heart with joy.

Roshan found himself falling in love with her with each new thing he discovered about her.

She asked him about his father's absence.

Roshan was usually cautious about bringing up the subject, considering how people regarded mental illness in a family when it came to marriage proposals.

But he had never felt so much at ease with any woman. Ever. So, he opened up.

Renu approached him and gently squeezed his hand as he told the tragic story of his father's degeneration and admission to the mental institution. She held his hand till he was done.

A flood of comfort he had never experienced before washed over him.

"He is in a better place. He is getting the professional help he needs. You did the right thing," she said with a sad smile.

"Thank you," Roshan said, wiping away a tear.

"Can I give you a compliment?" she asked.

"Oh," Roshan said in a surprised tone.

"No?" she asked.

"Please. . . please go ahead," Roshan stuttered.

"You look very smart, and you have the kindest eyes and the most radiant smile," she said.

"I. . . thank you," Roshan said, shifting uncomfortably.

There was a glitch in the fabric of reality. Roshan's surroundings wrinkled and rippled as if they were reflected in a dirty funhouse mirror.

Renu's voice was a guttural scrape of metal against metal when she said, "Handsome and a perfect vessel for the black ooze."

"What?" Roshan's voice wavered.

"One mind can never fully fathom him," Renu continued in her abominable voice.

He continued to run until he collapsed beneath a coconut tree, tears streaming down his face as he warned anyone who would listen about the danger from another dimension.

Roshan's heart thundered in his ears. A chill crawled up his back, forcing him up from his chair. The words he had just heard had an air of lunacy and prophecy about them. They were just like the words his father had uttered days ago.

As Renu spoke, a cluster of stygian tentacles sprouted from her eyes, snaking outwards for some distance before spinning clockwise to form a Fibonacci spiral.

“A single mind can never convey him to this dimension,” Renu declared.

She smiled, and the tentacles lost their shape and retreated into her eyes like filthy black water being sucked into the drain.

Roshan let out a scream that was more of a warning to the cosmos about the approaching calamity prophesied by Renu’s lovely lips.

Roshan fled the room and bolted past his relatives and into the paddy fields. He dashed across the sea of green, gently rustling in the air, oblivious to the immense peril that only he had been made privy to.

Panic powered his legs.

He ran until he landed in a puddle of brown water beneath a coconut tree.

And there he lay, wailing and warning others of the peril from another dimension.

Chapter 9

Sudha avoided discussing the pennukanal incident with Roshan. The humiliation she suffered in front of her family and the gossiping in the community stung her deeply.

“Roshan is well on his way to join his father in the asylum,” they said in hushed tones.

She was tormented by the possibility that the gossip mongers were speaking the truth. What if Sushil’s illness was also present in his son’s genes? What if it was lying dormant and choosing to awaken now to ruin his mind?

Personally, Roshan had blamed the trauma he suffered at the mental hospital for his disturbing behaviour at the pennukanal ceremony. However, memories of the shameful incident lingered over Roshan like a storm cloud for a few days until the euphoria that Black Magic poured into his veins dulled its red-hot anguish.

In a matter of days, the dread he had felt and the horrible sights that had forced him into a foetal position on wet earth had faded into the background hum of existence.

His mother’s awkward interactions with him were all that remained as a reminder of the incident. He hoped to address it with her in the coming days.

But for now, life was a kaleidoscope of stunning possibilities as he gazed in the mirror. New hairs sprouted on his scalp every day, and those that had appeared in previous weeks grew longer and thicker. He ran his fingers through this miraculous new growth, beaming like a man who had won the lottery.

Occasionally, he would see an older self in the mirror: an ageing, boring self, trapped within this new, vibrant self. That old shell was shouting a warning.

One mind can never fully fathom him.

Roshan considered these warnings to be death throes of an outdated psyche that needed to perish for his new self to emerge.

A single mind can never convey him to this dimension.

"Shush, stay silent," he said to the pleading reflection in the mirror.

A perfect vessel for the black ooze.

He smiled as he took another coal-black pill from the blister pack and placed it on his tongue. Its imperceptible but intoxicating taste killed off the appeals from the coward, whose pathetic visage slowly vanished from the mirror.

Chapter 10

In the third week of the treatment, the Night Salesman paid Roshan a visit.

As usual, he arrived in the evening.

"Sorry again about the late visit," he said. "I have a. . ."

"Skin condition. I know," Roshan responded.

The Night Salesman smiled creepily and said, "Your memory, good sir, is impressive."

"I can still get you that tea I promised last time," Roshan said.

"I must politely refuse your generous offer again. I came to check on you," the Salesman said.

"You guys should win an award for customer service," Roshan said.

"I can see the product has worked for you," the Salesman said, pointing a spindly finger at Roshan's head.

"It has, and I couldn't be more thrilled. In fact, I am more than happy to sign up for the treatment plan right now," Roshan said.

"Oh, give it another week," the Night Salesman said.

Roshan found this strange.

"We want you to be 100% happy with the product before you get on board. So, it's our policy that everyone must complete their monthly trial before they can sign up," the Salesman said. It was as if he had read Roshan's mind.

'Ah, I see. The old making you wait for a good thing tactic,' Roshan thought.

The night air turned colder and sent a shiver down Roshan's body.

The Salesman peered into the darkness, as if someone in the distance

had spoken to him.

“What is it?” Roshan asked.

“I heard someone speak my name.” the disfigured man responded.

‘*From the distant, dark reaches of the cosmos*,’ the words flashed in Roshan’s mind.

Roshan followed the Salesman’s glance. Shadows shifted restlessly in the distance, most likely foliage disturbed by a gust of frigid air.

“Any side effects?” the Salesman asked, turning his attention back to Roshan.

Roshan felt his insides turn. Something was attempting to escape from within.

His older self was like a neglected prisoner clawing at the wet, mouldy walls of an ancient dungeon made of meat and bones. He yearned for the truth to be revealed, and so he fought his way up the prison walls of his own ribcage.

Roshan’s throat bulged. Something the size of a small apple was obstructing his windpipe.

“No,” he croaked. And the troubling sensations vanished.

The Night Salesman leaned forward, steepling his fingers. “I will repeat that once again. Are you experiencing any side effects?”

‘*This is your last chance to escape this nightmare*,’ a frail voice echoed inside Roshan’s head.

The Salesman peered into his customer’s eyes, and in his dark pupils, Roshan saw the glorious hair growth that Black Magic had gifted him in such a short time.

The image rippled, and Roshan saw in that jet-black mirror a future version of himself as handsome as the Bollywood star who had waxed eloquent about the medical miracle.

“None,” Roshan lied.

The Night Salesman turned towards the darkness in the distant grove again, as if reacting to someone calling out to him.

Roshan saw his lips move silently, but he could not read the words they formed.

The visitor turned his attention back to Roshan and said, “That is great to hear. My work here is done. We will expect your call next week.”

Chapter 11

Little black drops pimpled out of Roshan's scalp as he slept restlessly. They were little pearls birthed in the night-terror scarred niches of his brain.

Once, they were primordial fears lying dormant within his skull. The black pills awakened them and forced his brain to make a nourishing broth to feed the nightmare-spawn. They brewed with malice as his mind grew weaker. They went from blind diatomic forms to comet-shaped entities that slithered with purpose in a matter of weeks. Intelligence pulsed in them with the regularity of an elevated heartbeat.

It had taken them days to tunnel their way out through the muscle, bone, and skin

It was critical that they finish their excursion with minimal disruption to the host. They didn't want to upset their nest.

They were here to briefly witness the glory of this dimension.

The droplet heads quivered as they considered their surroundings and remembered their dark purpose.

With only a week remaining until they achieved flawless excellence, they eagerly anticipated their extraction to realise their ultimate purpose.

So they dived back into Roshan's brain, their needle-thin tails gripping, twisting, and juicing his scared thoughts to feed themselves. To undergo the final metamorphosis.

Chapter 12

Roshan took his mother to the beach for a heart-to-heart. A frothy sea lapped at the coast beneath a saffron sky. The aroma of grilled seafood and treats fried in coconut oil wafted through the air. The laughter of children pursuing and then fleeing from the waves enlivened the late afternoon.

As they rested on the sand, Roshan told Sudha about the incident at the mental institution.

Sudha broke down and wept when he finished.

“I am not sure if it excuses my strange behaviour, which I know has caused you great distress, but I think that afternoon left me shaken,” he explained. “Seeing him like that really upset me. Since then, I have had nightmares.”

Sudha wiped away her tears and hugged her son.

“I am not surprised it caused you so much stress. That man has only brought our family sorrow,” she said.

Roshan could almost feel her relief. What was left unsaid was as apparent as day: “Son, I was scared you were insane.”

“I can’t say I blame him. He is unwell,” Roshan said.

“I have no problem blaming him,” Sudha said angrily, showing him the big scar on her left forearm—a memento of her husband’s frenzied attack on her with a kitchen knife.

Roshan averted his gaze, his face a mask of misery.

“I am sorry, Amma,” he said.

“Why? If you hadn’t intervened that day, I would be ash floating in this seawater,” Sudha said.

Roshan sobbed.

His mother hugged him once more.

“You don’t think less of me because I visit him, do you?” he asked tearfully.

“He is your father. You care deeply about him. I respect that,” she said.

“Thank you for saying that,” he said.

“I don’t know if I can ever go back, after what happened,” he said.

“No one will blame you for taking care of your mental health,” she said.

“I feel like a terrible son,” he said.

“I couldn’t have asked for a better child,” she said, her voice trembling. “God was gracious to me when he placed you in my hands.”

“Is it my new hair growth that is making you say that?” Roshan said, smiling through his tears.

“No. But it helps,” she said, giggling.

Roshan burst out laughing.

“I have said this to you many times, Roshan. You are enough, son. You don’t have to change yourself to be loved by others,” she observed.

‘If only I could embrace your beautiful words,’ Roshan thought.

He grinned, wiped his eyes, and turned his gaze to the food booths lined up behind them in the beach parking lot.

“I will get us some roasted peanuts,” he said.

He sauntered over to the snack shop and placed his order. As he waited for a new batch to arrive, he noticed his mother’s petite but spirited form silhouetted against the warm hues of the sea.

‘I want to remember her like this forever,’ he thought.

A discordant tune played by an infernal flute pulled Roshan out of his thoughts. The eerie tune mimicked the soundscapes of his nightmarish visions, and it contained some great coded mystery waiting to be uncovered. The symphony, which was flavoured with menace, poured anxiety into his trembling form.

He understood that revealing this knowledge would cause an unravelling. This message, once filtered through his feeble mind and converted into his species’ primitive speech, would wreak havoc on the Earth, decimating every atom.

He looked around for the source. A man selling plastic flutes strung up on a makeshift stand was playing the instrument. Roshan was unsure if he was the morbid musician responsible for this ghoulish tune.

He studied the man dressed in a faded black shirt and blue lungi

closely. After a while, he noticed something that made the hair at the back of his neck stand at attention.

Black viscous tears were oozing out of his tear ducts. Soon, the tarry substance clogged his eyes.

The man stopped playing and fixed Roshan with a blind stare.

“Sir, your peanuts,” said a voice nearby.

The flutist grinned, and Roshan saw that his teeth were stained black too.

“Sir. Sir, take it,” a voice said.

The coal-black mouth of the flutist formed the silent words, “One more week to go.”

Roshan recoiled at the sight.

“Sir, take it,” an urgent voice shouted in his ear.

Roshan snapped out of his trance. The stall-keeper looked frustrated as he shoved the peanut cones in his face.

“What, sir? Which dreamland are you in?” he asked.

Roshan took the packages and returned his gaze to the man selling the plastic instruments.

He looked normal.

Chapter 13

Roshan ran his fingers through his hair. “What a pleasant surprise,” he said into the phone as he sat up straight. The miraculous regrowth of his hair was the talk of the town, and everywhere he went, people stopped and admired the extraordinary turnaround. To these adoring fans, he preached the power of Black Magic and provided them the phone number so they, too, could experience its miraculous touch. He couldn’t wait until the weekend to sign up for the yearlong treatment plan.

Also, he hadn’t experienced a nightmare or a vision in days. He slept soundly every night. A sign that his body had banished the trauma that had scarred his psyche out of his system.

Now, receiving Renu’s call as he sat in his office reviewing some files was the icing on the cake. All of this luck seemed almost too amazing to be true.

“About the other day,” she said hesitantly.

His mind raced back to the spiral erupting from her eyes.

He banished the thought as soon as it appeared. He didn’t want Renu’s inner and outer beauty to be ruined by his feverish fantasies.

“I was under a great deal of stress because of an incident at my father’s mental hospital,” he replied.

Renu sighed.

“I am sorry if I caused you and your family any distress,” he said.

“You didn’t call to explain what happened,” she said.

“I. . .” Roshan’s words stuck in his throat as he realised how much she cared as a human being. How much she cherished his confiding in

her about his difficulties.

"Talk to me," she began, breaking the hush that had crept into the dialogue.

And he did.

She had granted him permission to release all the bottled-up emotions in his heart. So he told her about his father's antics, his dark visions, and how thoughts of her offered solace in the middle of all this gloom.

"I have been thinking about you too," she said.

Roshan laughed contentedly. "You have made me so happy. I have had such a wonderful week. But this tops it all."

He was waxing eloquent about his miraculous hair growth when she interrupted him, saying, "I think you need to see someone. Have a medical professional assess what caused those strange episodes."

"I have never encountered this problem before. I am sure it's stress related. Just a temporary disorder," he said.

"It's hypocritical of you to argue that your father should have got treatment sooner while refusing to do so yourself," she said.

The accursed flute started playing in the distance.

"I suppose," Roshan said, distracted by the music.

It grew louder, casting a net out from the distance, seeking minds primed to receive its despondent notes.

"I know someone you can speak to. He is a friend, and he has been practising at a local clinic for more than a decade," she said.

But Roshan was not listening. The music gnawed at his sanity.

The air took on a rarefied quality as he took panicked breaths to fill his lungs. A cold sweat broke across his brow. His vision blurred and corrected itself repeatedly. He thought he was going to have an attack.

"Roshan, are you there?" Renu said.

His knees buckled. The music was trying to tell him something.

"Roshan," a panicked Renu said on the phone, "Hello? Hello?"

A flood of agonising feelings surged over him. His veins felt stretched like strings on an instrument. His stomach churned violently, as if it was hosting a storm.

You are too far. Come to us—a concealed message in the musical notes unfolded its malevolent petals within Roshan's skull.

The piping continued, and it seized Roshan's skull, squeezing it like a fruit.

Come to us. Join us in the garden. There is no other way.

Roshan slammed the phone back into its cradle, cutting off Renu's

panicked voice. His body distorted into shapes he could never make before. He bowed forwards and backwards, moving almost like a worm.

The people in his section of the office had gone to lunch. So no one noticed Roshan slumping onto the floor, clutching his ears as his body convulsed and spasmed.

"Stop!" he shouted.

Come to the garden. Follow the music, the voice said.

Chapter 14

Roshan, a shivering mess mumbling under his breath, must have appeared insane to the passengers on the bus. He ignored their stares and prayed for a speedy trip home.

The need to scream and drown out the voices inviting him to the garden, as well as the awful music playing in the background, got stronger.

He was worried that the bus would be stopped and he would be handed over to the police if he unleashed the anguish churning away in his soul.

The garden awaits gardeners. The gardeners nurture the nectar deep within. When it matures, they tap the rich vein of blackness for nectar, for the black ooze. The gardeners are creators, providers, and harvesters. By completing this cycle, they become guardians of the garden, preparing it for his arrival.

The words raked at him like nails scratching against a chalk wall.

"Don't scream. Oh God, please don't let me scream," Roshan murmured as others on the bus glanced at him with worry.

An elderly woman eventually asked him if he was okay, but by then the bus had arrived at the stop, and he was able to flee to his home.

He held himself together until he reached his room. Then he closed the door and began howling and pleading for this waking nightmare to end.

His mother pounded on the door, asking him to stop and begging to be let in.

"What's the matter with you? Please unlock the door. Whatever it is,

we can work through it together," her voice breached the barrier between them, conveying love and care.

There is nowhere to hide.

"No!" Roshan screamed, clutching his ears. "Stop talking!"

Come, gardener. Come to the harvest.

"Get out of my head," he yelled.

Come, so that we can crown you as its guardian.

He began destroying his room's furnishings because he couldn't stand the clawing feeling within his brain.

He shattered the tables and emptied his drawers and cabinet.

Then he saw his appearance in the mirror—the madness in his eyes, the mouth twisted in an amalgam of a cry and a wicked smile, the lush growth of new hair.

The hair—the sinister ebony tendrils that populated his head like an army of spectres conjured from the darkest provinces of the night. His fingers sensed the liquid silkiness of each strand, imbued with the icy touch of the abyss. His scalp was the surface of a planet that had submitted to the libidinous wills of dark gods and the hairs stood erect like a million raven-black totems, marking this eldritch covenant.

Had it all started with the pill? Could it have sent him into this pit of insanity?

You always knew. You willingly embraced the blackness.

He took the last pill this morning. Why hadn't he made the connection and stopped taking it?

Suddenly, the same thing he had sought with fervent passion became the focal point of his most profound wrath.

He desperately yanked at the newly sprouted hair, but it refused to yield. Each futile attempt to wrench them from their roots only fuelled his frustration, as the stubborn strands held fast, as if anchored to his skull by an invisible malevolent force. The hair seemed to mock him as it defied his every effort to remove it, like an insidious curse refusing to be undone, like an awful plague unwilling to let go.

His vain struggle to regain control of his own body only exacerbated the despair that had taken root in his spirit.

He became enraged and smashed a metal clock against a mirror.

"I hate the sight of you!" he said as his hand rose and fell repeatedly, creating cracks at first and finally causing the glass to pour out like dazzling tears.

The garden is the gateway to this world. It will allow his most glorious form to manifest on this plane of reality.

He had just finished destroying the mirror when he heard his mother outside on the phone.

“No. It’s been hours. He won’t unlock the door. Just screaming and banging. O god, it’s terrible. No. Not the police. They will hurt him. I am about to call the mental hospital. Can you please come and stay with me? I am so scared and worried,” she said tearfully.

Hearing her say that crushed his heart.

“Look at what I have done. What I have become,” he said, slamming his forehead against the door.

The garden awaits you.

He exhaled heavily.

“I will come,” he said. “I will come to you.”

“If he tries to. . .hurt me, I will lock myself in my room. Please, quickly,” his mother begged over the phone.

The garden awaits. Follow the music.

“I will come to the garden,” he said in a defeated tone.

His mother hung up the phone. He sensed her staring at his closed door wordlessly.

“Don’t forget, son. I love you. No matter what,” she said.

Her footsteps then proceeded towards the back of the house.

He opened his door when he couldn’t hear her any more.

He couldn’t bring himself to say farewell to her before heading to the source of the infernal sounds.

Chapter 15

The flutes beckoned Roshan from the city's western outskirts, and he followed their call like an obedient pet. He marched through desolate streets marred with signs of violence.

Roadside stalls and booths were vandalised, and he noticed bloodstains on the asphalt. Shops were shuttered, and windows and entrances to houses were barricaded as people sought refuge from the anarchy. The police jeeps and paramedics rushed around, sirens blaring, attempting to end random acts of aggression around the city. As the orange glow of faraway flames banished the stars from the sky, klaxons ripped through the night.

Roshan wandered through this eerie landscape that thrummed with chaotic energies. He came across a lone homeless man, wounded and battered, sitting on the divider, his radio blasting the breaking news report. The broadcaster's terrified voice urged people to seek refuge as law enforcement dealt with individuals unleashing violence, allegedly because of voices in their heads.

"This just in. Local asylum inmates have killed the staff and escaped into the cover of darkness. The police are advising people to exercise utmost care. . ."

Roshan continued walking.

After a while, he joined a parade of people shambling along, muttering and sometimes bursting into cries, no doubt summoned to the same evil purpose as he was.

After an hour of strolling through the deserted cityscape, they arrived at the warehouse-filled industrial area.

At the centre of the precinct, a nefarious monument loomed large over the surrounding buildings. A baleful white light charged with the malevolent energies offered by dark rites conducted within its walls, poured through its windows and emphasised its immaculate façade. Roshan imagined that behind the respectable exterior was a secret abattoir, where cultist killers laboured away, committing acts of extreme depravity.

A long line of men and women shambled into the compound through an open gate. The owners of this shady complex were so arrogant that they left the grounds unprotected.

Once you enter, there is no going back.

At the entrance to the warehouse, the unfortunate pilgrims were greeted by a man who was familiar to Roshan. The sight jolted him out of his reveries.

Dressed in his trademark black and white suit, the Night Salesman greeted everyone with a creepy smile.

Roshan had come this far on autopilot, coaxed by a song that had hijacked his senses. Seeing the Night Salesman drew him back to the present and reminded me of how this bad sequence of events had begun.

The Night Salesman's jaundiced eyes fell on Roshan.

"Ah, my friend," he said, stepping forward and shaking his hand. "I am glad you made it in one piece."

The flutes stopped playing in Roshan's head.

"You were always my favourite. Allow me to give you a personal tour of the garden," he said.

Chapter 16

The term “garden” was a misnomer. The white floor stretched out towards an infinite horizon under the menacing gaze of corposant-lit rafters that crisscrossed the vast roof. Rows upon rows of chairs filled this infernal auditorium.

Men and women of various ages, their eyes fixed in the distance, occupied the seats. Some of them had their skulls carved open, and from those bloody wells rose animated tendrils of black ooze, forming Fibonacci spirals that pulsed lasciviously. Others were preparing to carve open the tops of their heads, which featured a lush growth of hair, with begrimed medical saws. A sad smile was plastered on the lips of these unfortunate souls as they prepared for self-mutilation.

The Salesman’s nefarious group ritual was not supported by acolytes. He alone seemed to have made these individuals compliant, aided by some unseen power.

“There is more to see. Come here,” the Salesman said, putting his hand on Roshan’s shoulder and leading him to a neighbouring chair.

A woman in her 40s, whose skull was still intact, plunged two long vinyl tubes up her nostrils. As the tubes were thrust deeper into the recesses of her face, her eyes rolled up into her head. The repulsive deed was accompanied by nauseating squelches, akin to the sickening slithering sounds produced by grotesque molluscs.

She appeared to be experiencing a perverse pleasure as she inserted the tube into her body. When it could go no deeper, she placed the free end of the tube into a glass jar. As Roshan watched in disgust, a thick, black substance oozed out of the plastic pipe and filled up the container.

“Rare, world class ingredients, just like I told you when I visited your lovely home,” the Salesman grinned.

The truth dawned on Roshan.

“Is this how you create Black Magic?” Roshan’s voice trembled as he spoke of the startling reality.

“What do you think?” the Salesman smiled.

Roshan felt a surge of sickness and vomited the contents of his digestive system onto the floor.

“Here you go,” the Night Salesman said, handing him a clean white kerchief. “This is not an unusual reaction.”

Roshan straightened up and wiped his mouth. He once again looked around in shock, struggling to come to terms with the nightmarish reality he had walked into.

“See how the gardeners are preparing for him. The dark ooze they cultivated and collected is now emulating the cosmic frequency. Thousands of these biological tuning forks are vibrating in order to aid a breach. A means for him to enter this world,” the Night Salesman explained with almost a childlike zeal.

“Who are you talking about?” Roshan asked.

“He is known by many names. Azathoth is a popular one. But the truth is—he is nameless, formless. He who dwells in the darkest gulf of the universe. He who sits on the throne of all-dimensional space, in that hallowed hall where balefully lit vortices grace his form and a million servants, including fortunate forms like yours truly, worship his magnificence,” the Night Salesman said.

A chill crawled through Roshan’s body as he listened to the praise.

“When is he arriving?” Roshan asked, his voice breaking.

“Not long now,” the Salesman said, pointing his pallid fingertips into the distance.

A churning mass of brown smoke the size of a large truck tire was suspended in the air in the distance. Eddies of actinic light swam through this opiate ocean of dread. The portal, a festering gash in the fabric of reality, projected muffled, horrifying cries from some distant infernal realm. The eldritch nexus hosted an evil entity that watched over the vile proceedings in the room.

Roshan’s stare was fixed on the rip in reality’s cloth. The Salesman’s remarks broke his intense concentration. “Come. Turn away. I need your faculties to be sharp to perform the duties at hand. Look too deeply into the void, and. . .”

Roshan sobbed as he mourned the ruin of the belief systems he had

nurtured throughout his life—all the knowledge he held sacrosanct.

"No," he shouted.

Roshan pressed his cheeks, squeezed his eyes shut, and shook his head, as if trying to shake off the nightmare.

The Salesman waited patiently for Roshan to vent his disbelief.

The Night Salesman was no longer dressed in his uniform when Roshan opened his eyes again. He had transformed into a shadow wraith —night made real in the silhouette of a man, with a pair of amber eyes and a sliver of a mouth.

"Your seat awaits," the Salesman said, motioning to an unoccupied chair farther to their right.

'Is escape even a possibility?' Roshan wondered.

Roshan looked at him with fearful eyes. Could the creature read his intentions?

"It's time," the Salesman said, nudging Roshan's arm. "First comes the harvest, then comes the conjuring."

When Roshan took the first stride towards the chair, he shocked himself. Then he took another step. Then another.

His abductor followed him solemnly.

Roshan was like a broken puppet being led to the oven by its master after a long career on stage.

"It is not as daunting as it looks. It can be pleasurable," the Night Salesman said seductively.

Roshan strode past aisles of individuals who were milking their brains for the dark ooze or carving open their heads. The sound of the metal cutting into flesh and bone made him shiver.

He walked past catatonic souls staring into the pulsating mass of un-matter in the distance as black vines erupted from their brains and crafted insane geometries that invoked the father of a million dooms. Gorge rose in Roshan's throat again, but this time he kept it down.

Fighting significant mental barriers, Roshan delved into his innermost thoughts to devise an escape from this nightmarish abyss.

The adversary had latched onto his insecurities, planted the seeds of self-doubt, and dulled his mind. Roshan was unsure of the boundary between his own free will and the evil drug's oppressive power over his ideas.

He could not comprehend the extent and location of the damage inflicted on him by the dimension-spanning malevolence. He, therefore, could not self-treat the malady which had a phantom grip on him.

The blackness baying at the doorway to his soul thwarted every

attempt to muster his inner fortitude. The fight for his spirit was literally diminishing the last defences that were stopping the death smog from infiltrating.

He was about to give in to the sinister forces tugging at him, dragging him closer to the whirlpool of madness and brutality.

Time was running out.

Only when he walked by a woman reminiscent of his mother's age and someone who evoked memories of Renu did he sense the resurgence of his fighting spirit.

"Don't forget, son. I love you. No matter what," his mother's words came back to him.

"I have been thinking about you too," Renu's words echoed in his thoughts.

Reminiscences of his cherished ones kindled a spark within him that blazed to life, despite being confronted by a tempest of foul powers. This radiant barrier encased his moral fibre, strengthening his soul's resolve. It became a fortress against the Night Salesman's schemes. His new-found fortitude, fuelled by tender feelings and love, started resisting the sinister forces orchestrating the Grand Guignol theatre around him.

It convinced him that there was more to life than this horror. There were scenarios in which he was not a victim compelled to join an evil cabal seeking to birth the destroyer of worlds.

Strength flooded his veins. With a defiant cry, he cast off his mental shackles and stopped walking.

Silence fell over the vast hall. Every macabre activity ceased. Even the split in the fabric of reality paused its infernal squirming to observe this act of rebellion.

With a roar of power, Roshan turned to face the Night Salesman. "I deny you the pleasure of ruining my precious life."

He attempted to push the startled monster, whose eyes were now blazing with rage. His hands, however, simply passed through the ethereal shade and emerged on the other side.

Roshan didn't let the shock of the moment dull his senses. He withdrew his hands and sprinted towards freedom, knowing that the evil encircling him would not remain inactive for long.

The grotesque activities around Roshan resumed as a frustrated cry erupted from the wretched lips of the Night Salesman, shattering the silence. Roshan's ragged breath and pounding footsteps drowned out the sounds of surgical blades and the heart-rending yelps of those who had given in to the whims of the wicked conspiracy.

Cold sweat formed on his brow as he pushed himself harder to escape the inter-dimensional trap that sat squat on the western end of his city like a cancer, blighting the idea of life itself.

The door was near. His legs burned intensely, weighed down by the build up of lactic acid. He felt the Night Salesman's icy digits reaching out to ensnare him.

Nonetheless, he persevered, taking strength from treasured memories —his father's love, his mother's playful antics, Renu's caring words.

He smiled through his happy tears as he escaped the cursed warehouse.

Chapter 17

It took Roshan and the turmoil-marred city several weeks to recuperate. It took him even longer to agree to see the psychologist that Renu had recommended.

At last, the incessant nagging from his mother and Renu's pledge to accompany him changed his mind.

Although most of the horrifying visions had ceased, he still dreamed of being imprisoned in the warehouse with the others, milking the black ooze, and offering his carved-open cranium to aid the efforts to introduce Azathoth into this world.

He couldn't stand looking at his tresses any longer, so he shaved it all off.

He took an extended leave from work to rest and reflect on the voyage ahead, a spiritual journey to break free from his toxic vanity. His desire to be something other than his authentic self had led him down a dark road, to a place he vowed never to visit again.

He wanted to travel with his mother. Take up a hobby. Upgrade his qualifications through a part-time course.

As Renu arrived in her blue Suzuki to take him to the psychologist, the grin on his face was sincere. It was the expression of a man who had found his calling and was ready to conquer any obstacle for a fresh start.

"How are you?" She asked.

"Good. And even better now that you are here," he said.

"I like the new non-hairstyle," she said, checking out his scalp.

"Hopefully you still like the other bits too," Roshan said.

She nodded enthusiastically.

They spent the rest of the journey talking about Renu's battles with the bureaucracy to set-up a new mental health charity.

"Well, if you ever need an accountant who is happy to do some pro bono work, you know where I live," Roshan chuckled.

Renu gave his hand a fleeting touch before saying, "Thank you. That means so much to me."

When they arrived at the small suburban clinic, the waiting room was vacant, and the receptionist's desk displayed a 'out to lunch' sign. But then the practitioner called out from behind the examination room's closed door, "Won't be long."

Roshan thought he recognised the speaker.

They settled into seats beside a miserable aquarium that housed a solitary black fish marred by a tumour-like protrusion on its forehead. The murky tank was aquascaped to mimic a barren shoreline. It provided no joy, just the smell of decay. On the walls were photos of the cosmos snapped by NASA's space telescope and linocut prints of various unnerving geometric patterns. The unsettling assortment of art pieces radiated malice. They resembled ominous visual enchantments guarding a gateway to the occult world.

"Strange choice of decor," Roshan remarked.

Renu agreed. "These psychology types can be eccentric."

"Come in," the psychologist called out.

"All right," Renu said encouragingly.

"I want you to come with me?" Roshan said.

"You need privacy. I. . ." Renu said.

"I never want to keep anything from you," he said.

Renu teared up. He wasn't sure she would join him.

Roshan reached out to her.

She rose from her seat, took his hand in hers, and said, "Let's go."

The consultation room was devoid of any warmth. It was sparsely furnished with tables and chairs made of stainless steel. The fluorescent oyster light fixture cast a cold white light on the linoleum floor. Several wheeled cabinets with blank labels lined the walls. A cupboard that reminded Roshan of a coffin glared at them with malice. He contemplated the enigmas it concealed.

The chilling sterility of his surroundings set his nerves on edge.

They could hear splashing water from the adjoining restroom.

"Take a seat. I'll be there in a sec," the voice said.

The voice was so familiar, but much to his frustration, Roshan couldn't place the speaker.

He surveyed the room again, looking for clues to help identify the owner of the voice. He wondered what kind of person would choose to practise an empathic craft in such a setting? Had he made the right choice by coming here?

When he glanced at Renu's lovely visage, his worries vanished. She would never offer a poor suggestion or suggest an option that was harmful to him. He was very fortunate to have her in his life. A kind soul willing to place herself in an uncomfortable position to help a friend.

Footfall entering the room drew Roshan's focus to the figure of the Night Salesman beaming down at him. He was dressed in an expensive black suit and hat. He had ditched the tie for a black embroidered cravat. In his hands, he held clear plastic tubes and a surgical saw.

"Surprised to see me, my friend?" he asked.

Raw panic gripped Roshan's body. A pit opened up in his stomach.

He attempted to speak, but all he got were croaks.

"Tell him, Renu," the Night Salesman said.

Roshan turned towards his beloved and saw that she was ecstatic. He noticed for the first time a thin line of scar tissue just beneath her hairline.

"Only upon relinquishing all hope does one realise that a garden can be nurtured wherever one desires it to bloom," she said, still smiling.

Roshan turned away from the woman he once loved in revulsion. He faced the Night Salesman, who bestowed a beatific grin on him with his gruesome lips. It was as if the creature and Renu shared the same forbidden euphoria; their camaraderie was sealed in blood by their adherence to the same dark philosophy. A motive so vital to their diabolical coterie that it could compel one friend to deceive another.

The Night Salesman raised his hat to expose a head, which was formed like a spider's egg, and had reptilian eyes and a human mouth. A sickly mucoid sheen coated the white sac, and through its revoltingly translucent surface, Roshan could see black spores vibrating. He guessed these eggs would spawn a thousand more Night Salesmen.

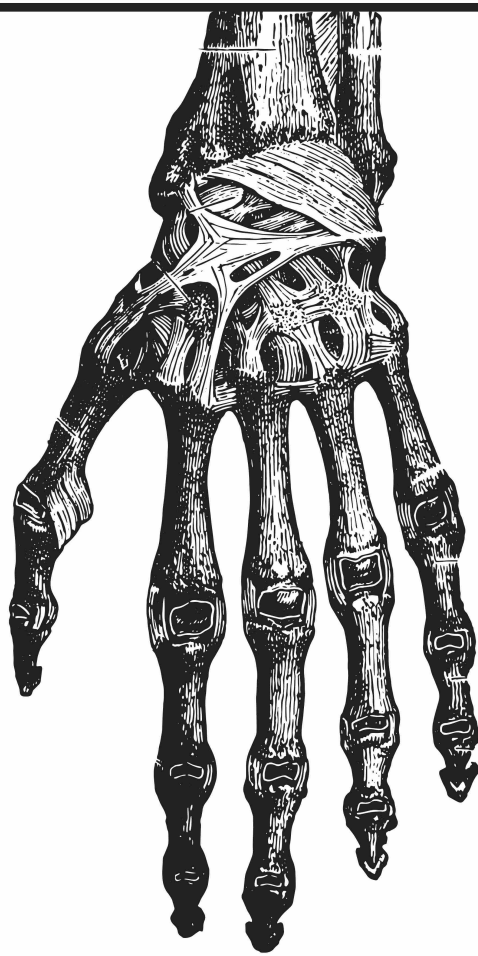
With his heart hammering in his chest, Roshan mustered all his courage to pose the question whose answer he already expected.

"I'm still at the warehouse, aren't I?" He asked in a quivering voice.

As he awaited the reply, the atmosphere grew dense with terror. His thoughts careened through scores of damning possibilities.

"What do you think?" the Night Salesman replied with a serpentine smile.

Beside him, Renu's mocking laughter rang out, and somewhere in the vast reaches of space, an unfathomable intelligence erupted in ecstasy.



BHANGARH

Chapter 1

"So, this is where you take your pants off," Ashish Nayar said with a mischievous smile.

"Like you're one to talk. I'm sure you will have more than your fair share of fun that you did the deed in the heart of the most haunted place in the country," Vipul Shah said with a chuckle.

"Well, we better get started before the ghosts get here," Ashish said as he threw his belt to the floor and dropped his pants.

"Why? Are you afraid you will not be able to get your cock up?" Vipul said.

Ashish laughed in response. His laughter echoed through the timeless walls of the Bhangarh Fort.

The ruins, which were bathed in moonlight, were nestled in the arms of a green valley, like a necropolis that had shunned the grace of God. Bats screeched as they flitted about in the dark innards of the old fort, and insects chirped incessantly, like an infernal chorus praising the darkness.

It was close to midnight when the two young men reached the small palace, which was the last building in the fort complex. The stone structure was set into the green hills that towered behind it with malicious intent. They had not come across a single soul, living or dead, during their night-time adventure.

"There are no ghosts here, buddhu," Ashish said. "They are just stories cooked up by superstitious idiots."

"Like the villagers who warned us against coming up here?" Vipul questioned his lover.

"Exactly," Ashish said.

Vipul did not believe in the supernatural, either. His private school education would never allow him to commit to the idea that the dead could rise from the graves and haunt old, ruined forts.

Nevertheless, the eeriness of the place sent chills down his spine every time he heard a creak, a splash, or a distant bang.

They had been backpacking through Rajasthan for nearly a month, and in a few days, this glorious trip of theirs was going to end. Why not finish it with a glorious night of sensual pleasures?

Vipul understood the appeal of adventurous sexual escapades. But more importantly, he was falling in love with Ashish. Every time they made love, it was as if the world was made anew. It had new colours, new joys, new sensations. Vipul had decided to confess his love the next day.

Ashish had set down their two torches on the ground before making his move. The beams of light from the torches created strange glowing orbs on the decrepit walls. They were like circular portals to other places, other worlds.

Vipul turned to face the wall, planting his hands against its cold, gritty surface. He smiled as he relished Ashish pulling down his pants. He got goosebumps thinking about the pleasures that awaited him.Vipul's pants were down to his ankles when Ashish stopped abruptly. He couldn't feel his lover's hands anymore. In fact, he couldn't sense his presence at all.

It was as if he had retreated abruptly into the oppressive stillness of this ancient place.

"Ashish," Vipul said. "What are you doing?"

There was no response.

"Are you trying to tease me? Or is this another one of your pranks?" Vipul enquired.

Vipul pulled his pants up and waited for a few moments.

"Ashish," he said.

While he suspected he would most likely find Ashish pulling a scary face at him when he turned around, he decided to wait longer. A knot of fear tightened in his insides.

"Ashish!" He called out to his lover urgently.

The primal core of his brain sounded alarm bells, and fear poured into every atom in his body.

The air had gone foul.

A sound like the grinding of mill stones or perhaps the opening of a crypt.

Vipul gulped. He was scared. He didn't want to turn back.

"Ashish, stop this silliness," he said in a wavering voice.

It started as a slight whisper. Then it built steadily into a murmuring chorus. He couldn't decipher the words.

Vipul sharpened his hearing to decode the chant.

It was all around him now. The horrible whispers.

"Have you. . . something, something." Vipul struggled to make out the words.

"Ashish, I am going to kill you if this is your idea of a joke," Vipul shouted.

The whispers stopped.

Vipul whimpered. His skin crawled as he recognised that some great wrongness was unfolding around him. It was pouring out of the walls of this wretched place, leaking down from the ceiling, clawing its way out of the cracked floor, which was a carpet of weeds.

The whispers started again. This time, it was right behind him. Hundreds of mouths chanted the mysterious query right into his ears.

And this time, the words were intelligible.

"Have you seen the yellow sign? Have you seen the yellow sign? Have you seen the yellow sign? Have you seen the yellow sign?"

His shocked body was compelled to turn around and face the infernal choir.

Vipul's eyes widened in terror at the sight before him. Ashish was with the 'others'. And he joined the 'others' in prying open Vipul's screaming mouth and thrusting their fingers into his throat, in a quest to unravel the mysteries of the yellow sign.

Chapter 2

Tarak Shah, one of India's most prominent translators of English literature classics into Hindi, lay on his couch in unwashed clothes, surrounded by empty whiskey bottles. Tarak snored gently and saliva drooled out of the corners of his mouth.

All the windows in the apartment were closed, so the stench of alcohol, stale food, and despair hung over it like a pall.

A manuscript bound in worn leather lay open on the coffee table. It was an obscure play penned in 1895 by an unknown author, which Tarak's half-Indian half-French literary agent pal Kalki had mailed to gauge his interest in translating the work. Tarak had read the first four pages over the last two days, between bouts of heavy drinking.

There was a knock on the door.

Tarak woke up with a startle, and after taking a few moments to come to his senses, he stumbled towards the front door, stepping over plastic cups, bottles, and fast-food wrappers.

When he finally opened the door, the sight of the obnoxious Saketh Roy, the society president, AKA the king of gossip, greeted him. He wore a half-sleeve office shirt, grey pants, and thongs that barely fit his lumpen feet. His potbelly caused the buttons in his shirt to strain against its fleshy magnificence.

Saketh's bulging eyes peered through his thick glasses, casting judgement on Tarak's plight.

"Here's all your postal items," Saketh said. "It was spilling out of the mailbox. Oh. . . what is that stench?"

"Thanks," Tarak said, grabbing the sheaf of letters.

Tarak was about to close the door when Saketh latched onto the lip of the door and said, “Tarak Ji. It has been two months since your son went missing. You must accept that he may not return.”

Tarak let out a sigh and gazed into his dirty apartment. Shadows had pooled everywhere in the residence that was once filled with the joyous laughter of his son, Vipul.

As a single father, Tarak had done everything to fill his son’s life with absolute joy, so the young man didn’t have to constantly grieve his mother, who died from cancer. His son and his vast collection of books were all he had to save him from the caustic sorrow that came with the tragic loss of his wife. And now that Vipul was gone, every other possession, and even life itself, seemed pointless.

The Rajasthan state police had concluded that Vipul and his best friend Ashish had probably wandered off into one of the national parks where they were last seen trekking and lost their way. They had informed Tarak that the chances of finding their bodies were minimal.

“I don’t know if you believe in God,” Saketh’s grating voice interrupted Tarak’s thoughts. “But that is one way to find solace in a situation like this. I know your son’s lifestyle was. . . sinful . . . so. . .”

Tarak slammed his hand against the half-open door and said, “Shut your filthy mouth, you cold-hearted bastard. My son was gay. He was not a murderer or a rapist to suffer the wages of sin dished out by your cruel almighty.”

“Well, sometimes the truth is uncomfortable. . .” Saketh began saying, but Tarak didn’t let him finish. He threw a hard right jab that snapped Saketh’s head backward. Saketh shouted in pain and reeled backwards.

A blinding light filled Tarak’s vision and sharp pangs of agony tore through his head, forcing him to double over at his waist. He thought he was going to puke his guts out all over the floor.

Slowly, his suffering faded, and Tarak could stand up straight. Saketh had his back pressed against a wall. He was holding onto his left cheekbone and threatening to call the police on Tarak.

When he regained his composure, Tarak said, “Fuck off, you fucking monster,” and slammed the door in Saketh’s face.

Once again, there was semi-darkness in the apartment. Only his angry panting broke the silence of his empty nest.

The discomfort returned with greater fury now. A bout of vertigo caused by the alcohol in his system assailed him, and he felt unsteady on his legs.

He threw the mail on the coffee table, slumped down onto the couch, and fell into a deep sleep.

Tarak had the same nightmare again.

He was on the banks of a still lake set beneath a night sky filled with pitch black stars. The surface of the water body was like a dispassionate sheet of glass.

In the distance, a cluster of spires, minarets, and towers formed an ominous city on a hill. A luminescence akin to a corrupt aurora borealis shimmered over its towering structures.

He had not seen a city like that before. Not in his travels to England, Greece, France, or Egypt. He could make out a yellow tinge to the paintwork on the buildings. His intellect opined that the colour designated the putrid innards underneath the maddening opulence showcased by the buildings.

He walked on the sand and the pebbles of that desolate shoreline, eager to reach the city.

He couldn't feel the wind against his face. He did not meet anyone on the way. His feet made no sound as they crunched the soil.

An odd stillness dwelled everywhere, as if time had stopped to indulge in this madness.

No. Time had not stopped of its own volition. Someone had imprisoned it in this domain. Time was in the thrall of some maleficent being yet unknown to him.

Suddenly, a thrumming resounded from the depths of the lake, which grew louder with every passing second before reaching an ear-piercing crescendo.

Then it too died down.

Tarak halted. He could now hear a faint call from the ramparts of the city on the hill.

Even though it was a faint human voice, he recognised it instantly. He would recognise that voice anywhere.

"Papa. Papa," Vipul called out to him.

Tarak opened his mouth to utter words of assurance.

"Vipul! I am coming to you, beta," he wanted to say. But he had lost his ability to speak.

The vision of the city wavered. The lights that limned its odd architecture dimmed. Then it dissolved into darkness, into nothingness.

"No. No. No. No," Tarak chanted in his head. He fell to his knees and wailed silently.

Suddenly, he noticed a spectacle in the middle of the lake.

He saw a tiny boat occupied by two individuals. He was certain the expanse of water was empty just moments ago.

The glow of a lamp resting on one of the thwarts of the boat revealed a woman in an opulent gown and a larger figure in yellow tattered robes seated opposite to her. The sinister figure's hood was pulled over his head and shadows obscured his face, even though the light from the lamp should have highlighted his features.

Their voices carried over the lake and Tarak could hear the conversation between them as if he was seated right beside them.

"That was not a part of our original agreement, princess," the man in the yellow robe said.

"Well, if that's the case. As the liege of this mighty kingdom, I demand you reveal your face. Take off that mask," she commanded, slamming a fist on her thigh.

The hooded figure said nothing for a few moments before shaking his head, as if he was disappointed in her.

He leaned forward and whispered something in the princesses' ears.

The princess reeled back in shock and cried out, "No mask! It's not a mask!"

The man in yellow turned abruptly and stared straight at Tarak, who was watching the spectacle in shock. The finer details of the pallid mask were vague in the distance, but no less terrifying, and it cored into Tarak's soul like a cursed worm.

The princess' scream rang through the shoreline.

Tarak woke up with a shout and fell off the couch onto a bottle of whiskey.

He winced in pain as its bottom smashed into his ribcage.

He took a few deep breaths to will away the discomfort and clear his head. He slowly sat up with his back against the couch.

His eyes fell on a shape in one of the shadowy corners of the living room. He tried to focus on the silhouette even as it grew larger, inviting whatever little light was present in the apartment onto its terrifying form.

The yellow robes. The pallid mask. The man from the dreams.

"What's wrong with me?" Tarak said, rubbing his eyes vigorously and slapping his face.

The terrifying hallucination dissipated.

"I need to fucking stop drinking so much," Tarak said.

A postcard on top of the pile of letters that Saketh had brought him caught his eye. The handwriting on it seemed familiar.

“Vipul,” Tarak shouted, as he scrambled over to the coffee table to grab the correspondence.

It was posted from Rajasthan two weeks ago. The card featured an illustration of an old fort on one side and a hastily scrawled message on the other.

“Papa. I am at the Bhangarh Fort. You must come for me. I will explain when you get here. Come soon. Come alone.”

It was Vipul’s handwriting alright.

“Bhangarh Fort. In Rajasthan,” Tarak muttered.

Was this a hoax? Had his son been kidnapped, and could this be the first step in securing his release? Did he have a mental breakdown?

So many questions for which he needed answers. But Tarak already knew the answer to the most important question.

Was he going to accept his son’s request? Yes, he was.

There was nothing in the world that he wouldn’t give up for his son’s safe return. His baby boy, who sang nursery rhymes with him late into summer nights, who watched Tom and Jerry with him and laughed raucously on lazy Sunday mornings, his champion swimmer who brought back scores of medals from sporting events held at school, his entertaining K-Pop dancer who saved him from slipping into depression and despair so many times in the last decade.

The postcard looked genuine, and Tarak was prepared to go to the very depths of hell for his son.

Chapter 3

Set at the base of an evergreen hill, the township of Dausa was a cluster of cream-coloured single-storeyed buildings that dotted the sides of its poorly maintained roads. The constant assault of dust storms and the harsh sun had baked and cracked the surfaces of the alleyways, homes, and shopfronts.

Tarak Shah had arrived by bus and was heading to a predesignated spot to meet the guide who was to help him get to Bhangarh Fort.

On his way to his destination, Tarak walked past the Dausa Police Station and was tempted for the last time to walk in and report the receipt of the postcard. But he suppressed his urge to do so by remembering what an awful job they had done investigating Vipul's disappearance. The endless red tape, the rude phone calls, the reluctance to get off their backsides to look at new leads. . . Tarak was done with the police.

He was convinced that his son was waiting for him at the fort. That very special soul connection, which only existed between a parent and a child, told him so. For once, he was going to trust his gut instinct.

Tarak followed the alleyways deeper and deeper into the labyrinth of Dausa's residential precincts. In the beginning, he saw turban clad men in white shirts and dhotis, and women in colourful sarees, or the occasional foreign tourist, wandering the same paths. But the further he got, the buildings and the paths looked increasingly desolate.

There was another oddity that caught his attention as he continued his journey. A symbol on the walls drawn with white chalk or graphite. A drawing of an open hand with an eye resting at the centre, which

appeared with increasing frequency as he journeyed on.

Tarak reached a junction of several paved pathways and looked around to orient himself. He concluded that he was lost.

He consulted his map.

Tarak was meant to meet Raju, the guide, in front of the Bhawar grocery store. He was convinced he was heading in the right direction, but according to the map, he was far north of where he should have been.

How is this possible? Tarak thought.

Tarak looked around at the sprawl of dirt-caked buildings and the jumble of power cables on the electricity posts around him. It felt like the desert-town charm of Dausa had been replaced by an ominous barrenness. He felt like the stone and mud structures were closing in on him, corralling him into a vicious trap.

He looked at the five different paths that radiated out of the junction.

“Which one should I take?” he muttered.

He fumbled with the map briefly before opening it up and studying his options.

Then he heard music and the droning of human voices from inside one of the buildings. It had a blue facade, and it looked like a community hall. Above the wooden French doors, which offered the only means of entry, was the sign—the hand with the all-seeing eye resting in its centre.

Tarak decided to seek assistance from the occupants of the hall.

He quickly glanced at the ominous symbol staring down at him before opening the doors.

Chapter 4

When Tarak entered the hall, he was surprised to see it was packed to the brim. People dressed in formal kurta pyjamas, exquisitely patterned shirts and dhotis, sarees, ghagras, and kurtis were seated on plastic chairs facing a lit stage that was barely visible through the yellow curtains.

The ceiling was blue, and floral murals graced the tops of the three white-washed walls.

The stage was a raised platform made from scuffed and weathered wood, and the flimsy curtains had been washed too many times.

Reluctant to disturb the seated patrons, Tarak walked towards a row of men standing at the back to seek their help in finding his way to the Bhawar grocery store. But as he approached them, he heard the door to the hall closing behind him, even though he did not see an usher at the door or attendants roaming the hall.

The hall was now dark except for the stage light filtering through the curtain. It cast a yellow glow on the inscrutable faces and the watery eyes that gazed upon it.

Tarak approached a man with a thickset moustache and opened his mouth to air his query.

But the man shushed him and pointed at the stage.

A droning piece of music filled the chamber as the curtains parted and the play began.

“The King in Yellow, Act 2, Scene 2,” someone shouted from the side of the stage.

The stage’s backdrop was a painting of a balcony overlooking a scene,

which was familiar to Tarak. The dark sky filled with black stars. The still obsidian surface of the lake.

A woman of royal bearing was standing with her hands on an ornamental balustrade, gazing at the horizon.

The droning music reached a minor crescendo, and the sound of eerie cymbals and infernal flutes threaded into the hellish soundtrack.

A set of doors to the left of the stage flew open.

A man dressed in a tattered yellow robe, his face covered by a hood, entered the scene.

The woman in the regal outfit turned to face the man.

She raised an angry finger and said, “You promised, no harm will come to my daughter.”

“I have kept my promise,” he said.

“Where is she then? I have been standing here for the last three days for a glimpse of my darling child.”

“You promised me the crown. You promised me. . . .” The man began saying.

“Who are you to bargain with me, you wretch?” The Queen interrupted.

“I am the King of a domain far more powerful than yours,” the robed man said.

Tarak watched the exchange with growing fascination as recognition dawned on him. The male actor’s build looked oddly familiar. The man he had seen in the pool of shadows in his apartment. The terrifying figure in his dreams.

“I don’t care who you are or what mighty kingdom you reign over. I, Queen Cassandra, demand that you return my daughter, Princess Cassilda, to my loving arms,” the Queen demanded.

The man in the yellow robe, the man who claimed to be a king, laughed cruelly.

“Stop laughing, you heartless monster, and take that wretched mask off so that I may gaze upon the face of the coward who kidnapped my daughter,” Queen Cassandra said.

“No mask. It is no mask,” the man said.

The queen was stunned by the admission. She took a few backward steps.

“That is no mask?” She enquired fearfully.

“Look down at the lake. Your daughter is there,” the man said.

Queen Cassandra turned and peered over the balustrade at the waters of the lake.

“I see her. My poor child! She is screaming from the depths,” the Queen said. She leapt off the balcony, howling like a banshee.

Shouts of surprise emerged from the mouths of the audience members.

The King in Yellow turned to look at the patrons. Then the eye-slits on his pallid mask sought out Tarak amongst the throng. He stared straight at the translator and said, “Cassilda is not the only one screaming. So is Vipul.”

The power went out. Screams of terror rose from the gallery. Patrons leapt from their chairs and rushed for the exit, shoving and punching anyone who dared to get in their way.

The doors were locked from the outside.

They banged against it in desperation and begged for mercy.

There wasn’t an inch of space in the midst of the mob that buckled and churned like debris in a stormy ocean.

Tarak was shaken by what he heard from the actor’s mouth. He couldn’t believe his ears. Maybe he misheard it. How was it possible that this small-town production. . . he didn’t have time to speculate.

The rush of bodies pushed Tarak towards the entrance. Bony elbows and shoulders, clammy hands, and hard heads pressed into his body painfully, as the mass of bodies swelled and roiled.

The stench of fear hormones secreted by the desperate souls made Tarak dry-wretch.

Slivers of sunlight from the sides of the door teased the occupants of the hall.

It didn’t matter how many loud thumps and shoves were forced on the door. It refused to budge.

Tarak froze. He saw the King in Yellow leering at him.

He saw the wretched pallid mask. He sensed the powerful malice behind it. And he heard him clearly over the din of the crowd that threatened to squeeze the life out of him.

He said, “Have you seen the yellow sign?”

Chapter 5

Tarak Shah was lying outside, on the steps of the communal hall, when he regained his consciousness thanks to the fizzy soda water being splashed on his face. A young man with a pencil-thin moustache, who wore a floral shirt and a pair of skinny pants, was shouting, “Sir. Sir. Wake up,” as he liberally sprinkled the cold liquid on Tarak’s confused visage.

“The play. The King,” Tarak mumbled as he sat up.

“I am Raju. Your guide, sir,” the young man said, as he continued sloshing Tarak with liquid from the 5-rupee green goli soda bottle.

“Stop what you are doing,” Tarak said angrily.

“I came looking for you when you didn’t turn up at our appointed meeting place,” Raju said, placing the bottle on the steps and wiping his hands on the back of his trousers.

Tarak looked back at the locked doors of the hall where he had watched that godforsaken play.

“Have they taken everyone to the hospital?” Tarak enquired.

Raju gave him an odd look and said, “What? I don’t understand.”

“I was inside watching a play, and then. . .” Tarak began saying.

Raju pulled down the sides of his shirt and flashed a knowing smile: “Ahhh. . . you must be on drugs like a lot of the other tourists who come here. What did you take?”

“I am not on bloody drugs. There was a play on, and then the power went out, and there was a stampede. People were screaming and trying to get out of there. But the doors. . . and this man in a mask. . .” Tarak felt lightheaded and stopped talking.

“Sir, that place hasn’t been opened in years. Many years ago, there was a gas leak at a function held there, and many people died. It was a great tragedy,” Raju said.

“But I was in there, watching a play. . . I. . . I,” Tarak protested.

“Come on, I think you need some lunch,” Raju said, lending him a hand.

Chapter 6

After lunch, Raju and Tarak proceeded to the lodge, which was above a restaurant that only opened for dinner. Tarak was relieved to be left alone in his room after being subjected to an hour of Raju's ceaseless conversations on everything ranging from his colourful history as a guide, his family's dubious links to a royal family and his love for Salman Khan movies. That and the cheesy ghost stories surrounding Bhangarh Fort, which seemed to be inspired by B grade soap operas that droned on endlessly on Indian TV channels. An arrogant princess, the curse of a tantrik - mumbo jumbo that Tarak didn't have time for.

"True sir. The place is super haunted. The only reason I am offering to come with you tonight is because of the extra cash. Otherwise, it's not worth the risk," Raju had said.

"Sure," Tarak had responded dryly, unable to hide his contempt.

Tarak's son was trapped at the fort, and he needed to get there as soon as possible. That was all he cared about.

Raju had left the lodge, promising to find a driver who might take them to the fort at night. But he had warned it might be a hard ask, even if they threw lots of money at the problem, given the hesitation of the superstitious residents of Dausa, who were too scared to go anywhere near the fort after sunset.

"Few people here have balls like me, Sir. Mine are big. My mother always used to say I am the bravest boy in Dausa," Raja had said before he left whistling tunes from a Bollywood item number.

Tarak sat down on the old, wooden single bed and looked out of the

only window in the tiny room. Dusk was setting the horizon on fire, and the heat was down to manageable levels.

Tarak was still struggling to process what had happened to him in the hall. Given the already stressful nature of his mission, he resigned to the fact that he was probably dehydrated and exhausted. He must have collapsed and passed out on the street and hallucinated.

He started thinking about what he was going to tell Vipul when he finally met him.

He would ask him why he hid in the ruins. He would ask him about the whereabouts of Ashish.

And once he had some answers to those pressing questions, he intended to apologise for not being a good father. For not shielding him from a cruel world that judged him for his sexual orientation.

Maybe he didn't work hard enough to help him forget the sadness brought about by the loss of his mother.

But before he said any of those things, he was going to hug him tight, like he would never let him go.

Tarak wiped away tears and looked on as the orange of the dusky sky turned to a crimson red.

Chapter 7

Raju was digging into a plate of samosas and tamarind chutney when Tarak arrived at the downstairs restaurant. It was a rustic joint with benches and narrow tables that had seen better days. Deep-fried delicacies were showcased in glass containers. A tall stainless steel chai brewer shot steam out of its rattling lid with clockwork precision. The restaurant could seat 20, but it was crammed with double that number. Hungry day labourers eager to catch a meal before heading off to their crowded dormitories chewed their meals noisily, stopping occasionally to engage in loud chats with their companions. A ceiling fan covered in cobwebs rotated listlessly and offered no relief from the heat radiating from the tiny kitchen at the back.

"Do you want me to order anything for you, Sir?" Raju asked.

"No. I will eat later," Tarak said.

Raju shook his head before biting into another samosa.

"Sir, what kind of books do you write? I mean, I know you said you wanted to write about the fort, and that is why we are visiting the place tonight. But I was curious. Do you write spicy masala ones?" Raju enquired.

"What do you mean?" Tarak asked, raising an eyebrow.

"I am currently reading a masterpiece called 'My Hot College Adventures'. Sizzling Sir. Sizzling. One sex scene followed by another. My favourite bit is when Jithu, the hero who is a milkman, accidentally enters the girl's hostel. . ." Raju began.

"No, I don't write about creeps. I translate great classics of English literature into Hindi," Tarak said.

“What?” Raju asked, looking confused.

“Never mind. Did you find a driver?” Tarak asked.

“Yes. He will meet us here in half an hour. Around 9 p.m.,” Raju said.

He then smiled cheekily, scratched the back of his head, and said, “He asked for 2,000 rupees more than what you offered to pay.”

“Obviously,” Tarak said dryly.

Raju smiled and nodded before returning his attention to the plate of fried delicacies.

The sight of all the delicious food around him convinced Tarak that he needed to eat something before the trip. He bid Raju farewell, grabbed a small pack of snacks, paid for it, and exited the restaurant.

He saw a few empty benches underneath a Gulmohar tree in the distance. Tarak ventured out there to eat in peace. He needed some peace and quiet to mentally prepare himself for the task at hand.

A streetlight on the opposite side of the road kept the darkness at bay. The occasional breeze evoked a muted reaction from the foliage as it swept eastward to the hill country and barely dented the oppressive heat.

Tarak had just sat down and taken a few bites of his oily snack when a man in a saffron monk’s outfit arrived and sat next to him on the bench. He placed a cloth sack covered in Sanskrit quotes in the space between them.

A saffron shawl which was wrapped around his upper torso and head, hid his facial features.

He did not acknowledge Tarak’s presence at first. He just stared off into the gloom proffered by the desert night.

His hands, which were the only exposed parts of his body, looked ancient, like they had been baking in the sun for decades.

An elderly pilgrim, most likely. The region was famous for its many Hindu temples.

Tarak continued eating, even though he felt discomfort at the stranger’s proximity. He wanted solitude. Dausa had no intention of offering it to him.

“I have worked on the manuscript for ages. My eyes, my hands, and my intellect are failing me now,” the man spoke up, abruptly.

Tarak stopped mid-bite and looked at him.

“A hundred years, and I have only managed a few lines,” the man said.

“Who are you?” Tarak asked.

“I keep reading the play repeatedly. I am obsessed by the madness of

it all. Such corrupt delights lie within these pages," the stranger said.

"I am not interested in talking to you," Tarak said, getting up from the bench.

"I don't know if this is a task I am qualified to continue. I am intoxicated by its vile contents. Should an alcoholic be allowed to manufacture alcoholic beverages? I don't think so," the stranger continued.

Tarak had barely taken his first step away from the bench when the man grabbed onto him. The strength of his grip shocked Tarak.

The skin on the stranger's palm felt like tree bark, and Tarak cringed at the sensation.

The stranger tapped his cloth bag with the other hand and fixed Tarak with an intense gaze before uttering, "The play needs a new translator."

At that moment, Tarak saw the stranger's face. The skin was wrinkled beyond belief and it clung to facial bones desperately. It was as if living flesh had completely evacuated his visage. His eyes were milky white, and matter that resembled dried tea leaves mottled his teeth.

Tarak pulled away in horror.

Much to his relief, his attention was suddenly drawn towards Raju, who was calling out, "Sir. Sir. The driver is here."

The guide stood in front of the restaurant, beckoning him with animated gestures.

When Tarak glanced back at the bench, the old man had departed with his bag.

"Sir. Sir, it's time to go to the fort," Raju shouted in the background, as Tarak fixed his eyes on the man who limped away into the darkness ahead.

Chapter 8

The auto-rickshaw driver encouraged his rickety vehicle to brave the potholes and dips on the unpaved road to Bhangarh. He did not speak a word to his passengers.

He didn't need to. Raju was doing all the talking.

"The Tantrik who cursed the town lived in a hut over there," Raju said, pointing to the black shape of a hill in the distance.

"Legend has it that when the King of Bhangarh refused to give his daughter's hand in marriage to the Tantrik, he crippled him with an evil spell and kidnapped the princess. No one heard from the kidnapper or the poor girl for months. Finally, because of the pleas of the Queen, who begged for a glimpse of her daughter, the Tantrik visited alone to tell her what had happened," he continued.

"He arrived in yellow robes, his face hidden behind a creepy mask, and he told the Queen about the fate of her daughter. No one knows exactly what he whispered into her ears, but on hearing his words, the Queen leapt off the balcony and fell to her death," Raju narrated as the rickshaw rattled towards its destination.

Raju continued, "The tantrik left. He also left behind the taint of evil, because a thriving township of thousands suffered many misfortunes—famines, deaths, people vanishing into thin air. . ."

Tarak snapped to attention at this comment.

"Do people go missing in the ruins now?" Tarak asked.

"No, not recently," Raju said. "I mean, who knows? Nobody ventures out here past sunset. But if you are stupid enough to do so. . . not even God can save you. It is said that if you visit that cursed space after 6 pm,

a curse will follow you home."

Tarak sighed as he gazed at the menacing dark foliage lining the sides of the road.

"Only my family knows the real reason for the horrible plight of this place," Raju continued. "You want to hear, Sir. This is secret stuff. Not even my girlfriend knows about this. But you are a top fellow, Sir, I will tell you."

"Carry on," Tarak said, rolling his eyes.

"The last Raja of Bhangarh had a nephew who studied in France. He became obsessed with a certain play that he wanted to translate into many Indian languages. He came back to the palace after his studies. It is said that the moment he began translating the work in the Haveli, strange things started happening in the township. Dogs howled. Owls hooted. Townspeople jumped into wells. Babies were murdered. It all went downhill from there. Residents left the town in droves, and once all the members of the royal family were dead, it was abandoned," Raju said.

"What about the translator of the damned work?" Tarak asked.

"He disappeared," Raju said.

Raju's storytelling abilities and his charm were melting Tarak's jaded heart. But there was another reason for the sudden interest. The image of the ancient man who accosted him earlier in the evening popped into Tarak's head every time Raju mentioned the nephew who was hellbent on translating the infernal work.

"Sir, the stories I told you about the place. No one else will tell you these things. These have been passed down to me from my forefathers. So. . . I hope you will tip extra for my special service," Raju said.

Tarak didn't respond. He slipped into anxious thoughts about what he was going to discover when he reached the ruins.

The eminent translator wore a white linen shirt underneath a trekking jacket and a pair of khaki pants with plenty of pockets filled with spare batteries for his torch, a multipurpose toolkit, and small packs of biscuits. He had also brought along a spare torch for Raju and a steel flask that could be strapped to his belt. He was prepped to explore.

Raju looked unprepared for the task that lay ahead in his gaudy printed shirt and grey pants, and worn chappals. Tarak chalked it up to his prior experience with the site.

The silent driver braked the vehicle and sat idling the engine.

"We have reached our destination, Sir," Raju said with a smile.

The rickshaw's headlamp and a half-moon cast a ghostly light over

the remains of the timeworn settlement.

Founded in the 16th century, the township of Bhangarh was now a ruined cemetery of fort walls, bazars, havelis, temples, and royal palaces peppered along a green valley.

Tarak exited the vehicle, switched on his torch, and gave the other to Raju.

“Wait for us. We might be here for a few hours. There is more money in it for you,” Tarak said to the driver, who nodded in the shadowy interior of the vehicle.

Tarak tried to glimpse his face, but couldn’t.

The driver switched off the engine.

“He doesn’t say much, does he?” Tarak said.

“Did you say we are going to be here for hours?” Raju said, looking distressed. The bravado he had displayed throughout the ride vanished.

“I will be honest with you. I am here to look for my son. I believe he is trapped somewhere in the ruins.” Tarak said.

“What? Why didn’t you tell me this? How can you be sure that he is here?” Raju said.

“He wrote to me,” Tarak said, knowing how ridiculous he sounded.

“Wait. That makes no sense. We need to tell the police,” Raju said.

Tarak realised that while Raju’s non-stop chatter was annoying and his greed was unpleasant, the young man was more switched on than he was. Raju could see the gaping holes in the logic that spilled out of Tarak’s grief crazed mind.

Tarak placed both his hands on Raju’s shoulders.

“Please. I am a father who has lost his only son. I beg you. Help me find him. I just want to walk through the ruins, calling out his name. If we don’t hear from him in a few hours, we will go to the authorities immediately. Please,” Tarak begged.

Raju looked around in discomfort.

“I will give you more money,” Tarak pleaded.

“Okay,” Raju said.

Chapter 9

At the entrance, a board installed by the Archaeological Society of India screamed warnings about entering the ruins after sunset in multiple languages. The sounds of animals baying and moaning in the hills filled the night air, and the cloying scent of floral shrubs assailed their nostrils as Tarak and Raju stepped through the front gates, which were wide open.

Beyond the first wall were the mostly intact temples, which evoked the beauty of Naga architecture. Ponds and other structures that facilitated worship flanked these beautiful structures.

Malevolent intent radiated out of the weathered stone facades as a low hum. It rocked Tarak's confidence.

He convinced his mind that any deserted building would seem ominous during the night. He illuminated their worn surfaces with his torch and rescued them from the shroud of darkness. He asked his mind to guard itself against unwanted suggestions of spectral machinations as he continued on.

"Vipul, Vipul," Tarak called out his son's name. And Raju joined in.

They walked on in this manner, shouting the young man's name while they illuminated the overgrown remains with their torches.

There was no response, but occasionally they would halt in fear as creatures hidden in the hills that surrounded Bhangarh answered their calls.

They walked through another open gate that led to the second set of fortifications, which housed what was once the business and residential precincts.

The structures in this section were worse-off compared to the ones in the temple district. Roofs were missing, and entire walls had crumbled into vertical piles of shattered slabs that resembled cairns dedicated to some maleficent pagan deity.

People would have once dwelled and conducted business on these streets, Tarak thought.

In the darkness, the boughs of the squat trees seemed to host thin taloned arms ready to come alive at the slightest provocation. Occasionally, the light from the torches revealed what looked like blue satanic eyes that peered from the murky innards of the ruined market complex. Tarak dismissed these visual aberrations as tricks played by light and shadows.

Raju had grown increasingly fearful and jumped at rustling noises made by scared lizards scampering away into the bushes.

Tarak did not blame Raju. On a couple of occasions, the sound of stones being pelted at walls startled him. Distant whispers raised his hackles. On close consideration, Tarak conceded that these may have been the doings of the nocturnal animals that roamed the ruins.

An ominous single storied haveli leered at them from the distance. Its arched windows formed shadowy mouths, and the dilapidated brickwork radiated an aura of sadness.

Once it was a grand monument, several stories high, but age had reduced the stunning rooftop garden and the royal chambers to a pile of rubble.

“That is the last place to check, Sir,” Raju said.

Tarak nodded. “Thank you. Keep calling Vipul’s name.”

Tarak and Raju had only taken a few steps when they were stunned by a shocking sight. They both spotted the phenomenon at the same time.

A flame appeared at one window of the haveli and then disappeared.

Tarak’s heart skipped a beat.

“You saw that, didn’t you?” Tarak asked.

“Yes. Yes,” Raju said in a wavering voice.

“Come on, let’s get up there,” Tarak said enthusiastically. He stormed ahead of Raju, who jogged behind him, whispering a prayer.

“Vipul, Vipul,” Tarak shouted.

“Sir, are you sure?” Raju said. There was no bravado left in the man.

“Just follow me and keep calling out to my son,” Tarak said.

They entered the open gates of the barbican and jogged up the sloping cobbled pathway that wound around a few times before linking

up to the darkened haveli.

The baying sounds from the hills intensified, as if the very act of entering the building pained whatever souls lamented on those green slopes.

“Are you ready?” Tarak said to Raju. “I will need you to guide me from here.”

Raju gulped and nodded. Beads of sweat bathed his forehead. He was licking his lips like a man who hadn’t seen water for days.

Together, the two men entered the Haveli bearing torches.

Chapter 10

The light of the half moon and the sweeping beams of the torches reported the sad state of the haveli that was once a glorious abode of the mighty rulers of Bhangarh. Royal family members dined, boozed, watched performances, and rested in these ornate halls. But now it was the domain of eerie night-time whispers and the blackest of shadows.

Tarak and Raju called out to Vipul and trained their lights on every surface and into the interior of every dilapidated room. They searched in this manner for nearly an hour.

The eeriness that leeched out of the place contrasted against the rude chalk drawings of daytime visitors. Neha loves Adan—read one hastily crafted graffiti.

The gloom hissed like a restless beach as they wandered deeper into the abandoned mansion.

There was no sign of Vipul anywhere.

Tears welled up in the translator's eyes as he began accepting the fact that the set of events that had conspired to bring him to the ruins was a cruel joke.

They had reached the rear of the manor house, which featured a long balcony with a damaged balustrade. The missing chunks of stonework opened up into a steep drop to the rocks below.

"Please be here. Please be here," Tarak prayed.

"Vipul, Vipul, I got your postcard. Beta, are you here?" Tarak shouted.

The baying of the night beasts in the hills intensified, almost reaching a crescendo, before dying down abruptly. The sudden hush was so

painful, it felt like Tarak's insides were being squeezed by unseen hands.

There was a shift in reality. Something had crossed over into the mortal plane, bringing with it a psychic maleficence that instantly saturated the creepy halls of the haveli. A gnawing sense of dread crept into the vulnerable corners of Tarak's mind.

Raju, who was behind Tarak, let out a short, barking laugh. Then he switched off his torch.

"I know Sir. You don't respect me. Respect the social class I come from. My simple personality. I know. I know. You are bada aadmi. . . learned, successful. Poor Raju, what does he know? With his simple jokes and his simple dreams. Raju is at the bottom of the ladder. Amongst the nobodies," Raju said.

"What nonsense are you talking, Raju? Switch your light back on before you step onto the balcony. It's dangerous." Tarak said.

"There is another order, Sir. The real order of life. He is at the top of that ladder. And puny humans with their little ambitions and sorrows are like Raju. You are like Raju," Raju cackled like a maniac.

"Raju!" Tarak shouted angrily.

"He is here. He is here," Raju said. It sounded like his teeth were chattering from hypothermia.

There was a splash, as if a body had fallen into water. Violent thrashing followed it, like someone was drowning.

"It is wet, Sir. I feel cold," Raju's wavering voice said. It sounded like he was speaking from underwater.

Tarak lit up the room where Raju had once stood.

The guide had vanished. His torch rocked on the cracked floor where it fell, its protective glass shattered.

"Raju, where are you?" Tarak enquired urgently.

Tarak imagined he heard a mocking laugh from an adjacent room.

"Stop playing games with me, you fool. What are you getting at? If you try to rob me, I will smash your head in with my torch," Tarak said, unable to contain his anger.

Tarak shook like a leaf. Fear made his hands clammy and his skin crawl.

He took some deep breaths to calm himself.

"Papa, you came," someone uttered.

"Vipul, Vipul," Tarak said, turning towards the voice.

"Papa, it is so good to see you," the voice said.

'That was Vipul's voice,' Tarak thought.

"Son, where are you?" Tarak enquired, scanning the balcony with his

torch.

"I am here, Papa," Vipul said.

Tarak saw him. Vipul was naked and standing close to the edge of one of the damaged sections of the balcony, which yawned open onto a long drop filled with deadly clusters of sharp rocks.

"Vipul, beta," Tarak called out as he rushed forwards to greet his son.

"Don't come any closer, Papa. I am sorry to put you through this. They made me. . ." Vipul broke into an uncontrollable sob. "Don't look at me Papa."

But Tarak did, and he moaned in despair at what he saw.

The light beam exposed the nude, bloodied form of his son. Raw wounds shaped like the sign he had seen around Dausa and at the entrance to the nightmarish hall were carved into his flesh. His face, his arms, his belly, his legs, and even his genitalia featured what Tarak had now come to accept as the yellow sign.

"Who. . . Who did this to you, son?" Tarak said tearfully.

Vipul did not respond. He started wailing in mournful tones.

"Come back from the edge, son; you will fall. Tell me, who did this to you? We will go to the hospital first and then the police," Tarak said, taking a few hesitant steps towards his injured son.

"I am no longer a part of this world, Papa. You must accept this and you must listen to what he says. You must accept his supremacy. There is no other option," Vipul said.

"Stand still, Vipul, you will fall," Tarak said, facing the savage form of his son.

Vipul stopped sobbing and lifted his face up to his father. The torchlight illuminated the bloodied presence of the yellow sign on Vipul's eyeballs.

Tarak reeled back in horror and said, "What monster did this to you?"

Vipul pointed behind Tarak and said, "They did this."

"What?" Tarak uttered. He watched on in horror as Vipul stepped backwards and fell off the balcony.

"No!" Tarak screamed and ran towards the rim. He looked down just in time to see Vipul's body bounce off the jagged peaks of the stony outcrops below. The torchlight revealed his battered and twisted form sprawled across the rocks like a sacrificial animal.

Tarak now spun around to confront his son's killers.

A mob of spectral figures. Some wearing ancient clothes, some wearing modern outfits, reached for him with their skeletal fingers.

Their forms were mutilated with sharp instruments to create a tapestry of bloody symbols, all of them paying homage to the yellow sign.

Their yawning mouths were full of rotting fangs and their cheeks had been slashed open with jagged blades. They croaked and groaned as they tried to grab onto Tarak. The translator smashed his steel torch into their limbs, breaking them. The bulbous end of the device found purchase in the skulls of the baying monstrosities. Ichor and pus sprayed everywhere as Tarak landed a flurry of strikes on the teeming ghouls that smelled of death and decay.

But there were so many of them to punish, and as he grew tired, his fightback became weaker. He fell to his knees and cried for the loss he had suffered moments ago. Tarak gave up on the spirited rebuttal and let the filthy claws grab onto his head and body.

“Vipul, Vipul beta. . . Vipul,” he cried.

From within the nest of hands, a pustulant visage emerged. It was Ashish. Tarak barely recognised him, given that his visage was a celebration of crude lacerations, a face butchered by a rusty machete.

Ashish opened his mangled mouth, which featured broken teeth and torn gums, and said, “We have seen the yellow sign, and now, so will you.”

The frenzied hands now focussed their attention on Tarak’s mouth and they forced it open as Ashish looked on. Foul tasting fingers entered his mouth and pulled out his tongue.

A lunatic’s laughter emerged from Ashish’s ruined mouth.

“There it is, carved onto your tongue,” Ashish said. “The yellow sign. The yellow sign.”

The horde moaned in pleasure as they relished the discovery.

Tarak bit and choked and dry-retched as the hands travelled deeper into his throat, desirous of his innards.

The moans of his oppressors were replaced by vicious snarls. Tarak’s mind and body could not suffer the cruel examination any longer. He lost consciousness and fell face first onto the ancient floor of the haveli.

Chapter 11

There were flashes of consciousness as Tarak lay in the back seat of the autorickshaw, journeying into the unknown. Awareness bursts forth like an exploding star.

His head was on Raju's lap, but flashes of illumination from street lamps revealed a pallid mask where the young man's enthusiastic face should have been.

The scream lay suppressed in his throat.

He blacked out again.

Another flash of wakefulness.

This time, the driver, who was mute and shrouded in shadows, turned around to reveal his visage. He, too, bore the pallid mask. And he spoke, "The most precious and holy of duties."

Tarak fell unconscious again.

He dreamt of Vipul's hellish form—his body covered in gore, bloody signs carved into his flesh, and then the final glimpse of his son, dead on a bed of serrated rocks. One of the jagged peaks had thrust in through the back of his head, and it rose from inside Vipul's mouth like a miniature mountain weeping blood.

"Vipul, Vipul. . ." Tarak muttered sadly.

Chapter 12

It was later in the afternoon when Tarak woke up, to find himself sprawled on the steps of the restaurant, below his temporary lodge.

His mouth was dry and his lips were parched. His body ached from lying in an awkward position for hours.

“Wakey, wakey,” the restaurant owner, who was opening up the joint for food prep, said.

He was a wizened gentleman dressed in a vest and dhoti, and he wore thin reading glasses on a hooked nose. He said, “Looks like you’ve had a night of drinks and drugs. Maybe girls too. That’s what tourists come here for these days. Nobody cares about our ‘cultural’ offerings.”

Tarak sat up and coughed.

Painful memories from Bhangarh flooded his body with sickening sensations. Grief gnawed at the inside of his brain.

“No, I am not drunk. I went to the fort with my guide Raju last night,” Tarak said.

The restaurant owner froze. “You went to Bhangarh at night?”

“Yes, I did, to look for my son, and I saw. . .” Tarak began saying.

“You will not speak one more word about what you saw. You fool,” the man said.

“But I. . .” Tarak protested.

“It follows you. That place. You’re cursed forever now,” the elderly man said.

“My guide Raju. He should be able to. . .” Tarak said.

“I know all the guides in this town. There is no one named Raju operating tours to Bhangarh. None of the guides here would dare take

people to the fort after 6 p.m.," the old man said. But something in the restauranteur's voice told Tarak that he was not being truthful.

"My son's body is still there," Tarak said, scrambling up to his feet, realising there was no point talking to the aged man.

"I am going to the police to recover my son's body and pop handcuffs on that cowardly tour guide who abandoned me," Tarak said angrily.

"The station is on the main street, 20 minutes from here," the restaurant owner said, pointing to the east.

Tarak climbed the stairs to his room gingerly to collect his belongings.

He could feel the old man's eyes bore into the back of his head.

"Do what you have to do and get out of here as quickly as you can. We don't want you spreading the curse around our town," he heard the old man say.

Chapter 13

The ruins looked equally menacing during the daytime. The blazing sunlight offered no answers to the police search party that combed every nook and cranny of the sprawling estate.

Not only did the three policemen and Tarak not discover any evidence of foul play on the sprawl of rocks behind the haveli, but there was also nothing to indicate people had camped at the fort for extended periods of time. There was no trace of Vipul or Ashish.

At the end of the search, the Inspector pointed to the Archaeological Society of India warning sign at the entrance to the site, which barred entry into the area after sundown, and handed Tarak a hefty fine.

“I can’t believe educated people like you do things like this, Sir,” the Inspector, a stern man in his 40s, said to Tarak. “And next time you get on drugs, please don’t waste our time.”

When Tarak registered his strongly worded opposition, the Inspector grabbed onto his collar and said, “You city dogs bring poison into our communities—your drugs, your alcohol, and your wicked habits. Most of your brethren at least have the decency to do their dirty deeds and leave us alone. But some pests, like you, stay behind and give us trouble. Get the fuck out of this town before sunset!”

“I am sorry. I am so sorry. . . I haven’t been myself since my son’s disappearance,” Tarak said, eager to escape the officer’s wrath.

The Inspector let go of him and stepped back.

“What about the guide Raju?” Tarak asked. “And the rickshaw driver?”

The Inspector rang the station on his mobile phone and enquired

about the research task he had assigned to one of the constables.

“Ha Bhuwan. Did you find any records of a Raju who is registered as a guide?” he asked, as he poked a finger in his ear and explored his dirty ear canal.

The Inspector sighed.

“What about the rickshaw driver?” He asked.

Tarak looked expectantly at the Inspector’s face.

“Ha. Ha. Okay. Good,” the Inspector said before disconnecting the call.

The stone-faced officer pursed his lips and shook his head, much to Tarak’s disappointment.

“Let’s go,” he waved his subordinates on.

He then returned his gaze to Tarak and said, “Make sure that you submit the postcard with the original investigative officers in the correct jurisdiction. And never commit buffoonery like this again. We have processes in place for a reason.”

They dropped Tarak off at the bus station in the police jeep, which earned him distrustful stares from the locals.

One officer in their group, an older constable who was close to retirement age, got off at the same destination. He was sympathetic and kind towards Tarak throughout the morning as they searched the ruins.

“There should be a bus to the train station arriving in 15 minutes,” he said to Tarak in a compassionate tone. “I am sorry that this trip was not fruitful for you. I understand your pain. My son passed away a few years ago.”

Tarak nodded vigorously, with tears in his eyes.

The constable then stepped closer to Tarak, placed his hands on the translator’s shoulders and said in a low voice, “There is a reason they couldn’t find any records about Raju the guide in the station registry. If they die, we trash their original application and the permit papers to save space.”

Tarak looked at him alarmingly.

“I remember a Raju from many years ago. He was a guide who took tourists, mostly young kids from the city, out to Bhangarh at night. He helped them film YouTube videos like ‘one night in India’s most haunted place’. We warned the fool not to keep pushing his luck. But he was greedy. The mini celebrity status he inherited from his starring role in some of those videos didn’t help either. That place is a portal to something terrifying. He should have listened to us.”

The sensations and the horrifying experiences he endured at the

cursed township came rushing back to Tarak. He felt unsteady on his legs. He tasted acrid bile on his tongue.

The constable continued, “They found Raju’s body in one of the pools. The Punjabi boy who came to film the video for his channel was found a few kilometres away in a car wreck. He crashed into a tree while speeding. I got the impression he was fleeing something terrifying. I will never forget the look on the face of that mangled corpse.”

Tarak leaned against a lamppost, struggling to cope with what he had just heard.

“Leave, son, while you still can. And for the love of god, never return to that place,” the constable said.

Chapter 14

On the train ride back home, Tarak trawled through hundreds of YouTube videos shot at Bhangarh before landing on one that chilled him to the bones.

It was shot at night on an SLR camera with a soft light attachment. The thin man smiling in several of the sequences was the same person who had guided him through the fort complex.

He checked the date. It was uploaded four years ago.

His head reeled. Raju's last words rang in his ears. "It is wet, Sir. I feel cold."

Were the things he experienced at Bhangarh the reflections of a shattered mind? Or was it a truth the world was not ready to embrace?

Tarak searched Google for testimonies from people who may have had similar experiences.

He found several posts on internet forums referring to horrifying encounters with an entity referred to as 'the King in Yellow'. There were journal articles on a mysterious play about the terrifying being, the reading of which would attract the attentions of the malevolent creature. Didn't his friend Kalki send him a similar play? He couldn't remember the details of what he had read on the pages anymore.

He continued scanning the search results.

There were paintings made by victims of an ancient city on a hill named Carcosa, which is said to have haunted their dreams. There were recordings of survivors recounting their experiences after entering portals that suddenly appeared on walls and transported them to the shores of a lake called Hali—whose waves, were accompanied by a

constant concert of tortured screams. There were pdf scans of suicide notes wherein the departed had begged for release from the constant torment of black stars in the dark skies and the sickening glow of the planet Hyades.

Tarak let out a long and defeated sigh.

He placed the phone back into his pocket and leaned his head against the window grilles. Outside, the world passed by in a blur. The metallic sounds of the train and its baying horn assured him he was in the real world, not the phantasmagoric mind-trips offered by the evil fort complex.

Tarak's body and mind were wrung dry.

He was only a few hours from home. He couldn't wait to walk in through the front door. Maybe the safety of his home would offer peace and sanity to his shattered soul.

"Where are you, Vipul?" Tarak muttered before drifting off into a dreamless sleep.

Chapter 15

The first thing Tarak did when he got to his apartment was to look for the manuscript from France—the play which had put him in the baleful sights of the King in Yellow.

But he couldn't find it anywhere. Dejected, he sat on his couch, that was covered in filthy takeaway boxes and empty beer bottles.

Perhaps it was time for him to move on. It was time to accept that the supernatural occurrences at Bhangarh and the mystery of his son's disappearance were beyond mortal comprehension. He accepted Raju's spectral advice and his son's final warning—stay away from the clutches of the King in Yellow. Tarak was a puny ant in the true order of things; something to be squished underneath the feet of the malevolent ruler of Carcosa. He was powerless against the cruelty of the universe and there was nothing he could do to hurt the occult forces protecting Bhangarh's secrets.

He scanned the filthy conditions in his apartment. Cockroaches scurried away into the shadows and a disgusting odour permeated the air.

He pulled out the duster, the brush and pan set, the broom, the mop, a bucket full of lukewarm water, the disinfectant spray and a rag, and tried to immerse himself in the cleanup.

He avoided looking at photos of Vipul as he engaged in his chores.

Tarak was convinced that his little man was gone. But it still hurt to think that his son might be in a place of great suffering.

Tarak wiped the tears welling up in the corners of his eyes before returning to his cleaning duties.

It took him better part of the day to get the place back to its original state.

He was too exhausted to take the rubbish down to the large bins near the watchman's gate house. So he had a cup of black tea, watched a rerun of a cooking competition show, and drifted off to sleep on his couch.

Tarak dreamt he was waiting outside the operating room where doctors were performing lifesaving surgery on his wife.

The details in the dream were near perfect, like the actual event he had lived through many years ago, when Vipul was a child. The sterile hallway featured white walls, plastic chairs, stretchers, wheelchairs and tube lights besieged by suicidal insects.

He knew what was going to happen. The doors to the operating theatre would open. A surgeon dressed in overalls would come out and remove his mask and express regret at not being able to save his wife.

Instead, the door opened, and no one came out.

Only a thrumming darkness was visible through the open door.

Its secretive occupants appealed to Tarak in seductive tones, inviting him into the abyssal gloom that reigned within.

The sight mesmerised Tarak. His body obeyed the call of whatever dwelled in that murky space.

He entered the room.

Suddenly, blinding lights banished the blackness and Tarak's eyes were drawn to the centre of the room, which was cordoned off with surgical curtains. Shadows moved within the screened walls.

He inched forwards, unable to curtail his curiosity.

He parted the green curtains and instantly regretted his decision.

There, in the glare of surgical luminaires, lay his unconscious wife. Her torso was sliced open, exposing vital organs.

Men in black robes stood around her. They were wrenching out the helpless woman's heart with a giant pair of forceps.

There was a percussive sound in the background, which increased in intensity with each passing second.

Tarak felt his bowels loosen as spasms of terror conquered his body.

A strong yank and the heart was torn from its resting place. One of the robed men lifted the bloody shape up to the light. The organ pumped furiously, squirting blood out from the shredded valves.

Another set of hands grabbed the heart and examined it.

In the background, the banging sound intensified.

They passed the heart onto someone new, with great reverence—a

figure swathed in yellow tattered robes, whose face was a pallid mask crawling with worms.

While the robed figures stared at his wife's body, the malicious being turned towards Tarak.

Worms clustered around the mouth of the mask and formed the writhing shape of human lips.

"It's time," it said.

His wife's body came alive with a jolt of animation and the drumbeat of a thousand hearts became her painful screams.

Tarak yelled 'no' and opened his eyes in a state of panic. A few deep breaths calmed his thundering heart. He realised someone was banging on his door when the disorientation subsided.

It was late in the afternoon.

Tarak got up gingerly and trudged towards the door.

Tarak was dreading the sight of gossip king Saketh when he opened the door. He was pleasantly surprised to see Rishabh, the civil engineer from 32A. Rishabh was a fit, handsome man in his early 30s with wavy hair and a trimmed beard. He was an admirer of Tarak's translations, particularly his series on Victorian literature.

"Namaste Tarak Ji. This was sticking out of your mail box. I thought I would bring it over and check on you," Rishabh said, handing over a stack of envelopes.

"Thanks Rishabh. Appreciate it. I have been good," Tarak said with a forced smile. "In fact, I have been travelling."

"Oh," Rishabh's face registered surprise.

"Just a few days in Rajasthan," Tarak said.

"Was someone else staying here while you were away?" Rishabh enquired hesitantly.

"No. Why?" Tarak said, his expression clouded with concern.

"Well, I heard someone walking around your apartment, talking aloud. Banging against the wall. Crying and screaming. It was loud, Sir. But we know you are going through a tough time, so. It's okay," Rishabh said.

"Oh no. Wasn't me. The sounds you refer to must have come from another apartment. I just returned this morning. Did a lot of cleaning. Let me tell you it wasn't in this shape before," Tarak said, pointing to the inside of his apartment.

To his horror, Tarak discovered the unit had returned to its former shabby state. The rubbish he had packed into three garbage bags was strewn over every surface in the room.

When he turned to face Rishabh, he saw the civil engineer peering into the dirty room with a concerned look on his face.

"Are you okay, Sir? Please let us know if you need anything. We are all so sad about what happened to Vipul," Rishabh said.

"Thanks for the sentiments. I am. . . I am fine. Just processing what happened," Tarak said.

"Thanks for this," he said, lifting the envelopes before closing the door.

He was shocked at the condition of his apartment.

'Did I do this in my sleep? Or did I not clean the house and just dream about it?' Tarak wondered.

'And who caused the racket in the apartment?'

'Have I gone mad? Did I never visit Bhangarh?'

Tarak placed the letters on the coffee table and rushed to his bedroom.

On his bed was the unpacked bag he took to Dausa and next to it were the train and bus tickets he used to travel back and forth.

"So, I went there. I have not lost my marbles," Tarak muttered.

'The curse will follow you,' he remembered the words of the restaurant owner from Dausa.

He exited the bedroom and entered the dining room on his way back to the dirty living room.

By chance, his attention was drawn to human feet peeking out from underneath the dining table.

It was motionless.

The icy hand of terror grasped his heart and squeezed it.

Then the logical part of his brain kicked in. This must be the interloper who created the ruckus Rishabh brought to his attention. A thief or a mentally compromised individual.

But how did he access the apartment? It was unlikely he scaled up the walls and crawled in through a window.

It was time to direct the questions at the intruder.

Tarak ran to the kitchen and grabbed a knife. He approached the dining table, screaming obscenities and threats.

But the person underneath the furniture did not respond.

Still pointing his knife toward the individual, Tarak bent down and peered into the shadows that housed the still form.

It took a while to adjust to the gloom, and when it did, he realised he was looking at Saketh Roy's lifeless body.

The corpse was naked. Its head rested at an odd angle, as if the neck

had been twisted and pulled till it broke clean from the spinal cord. His eyes were closed and a dark tongue lolled out of his mouth.

Saketh the annoying busybody and society president. The man he had punched merely days ago. Dead. No, murdered.

'Did he do more than just punch him? Did he drag him into the house and. . .?' Tarak wondered.

'No. That's not right. He had slammed the door in Saketh's face and left him outside to tend to his injured face,' Tarak argued with his mind.

Tarak dropped the knife to the floor and clutched the sides of his head and wailed, "Help me! Someone help me. I have gone mad."

He rocked back and forth, repeatedly saying "Help me, help me."

He paused and glanced at Saketh's body. It looked fresh.

'If I had killed him days ago, the body would have started decomposing,' Tarak thought. 'This happened recently. Maybe even in the last few hours. But. . . but. . . how?'

Tarak's brain was a crucible of agonising memories, discordant emotions, confused thoughts, and growing terror. His sanity was unravelling.

Tarak picked up the knife from the floor and pressed it against his throat. It was the only way to get rid of the pain and madness.

"This is what you want, isn't it? It's what you've always wanted. To see me devolve into derangement and sever my sick head. You vile, cold-hearted bastard! I know you are here. I know you can see my plight and hear my cries. You have stolen my precious Vipul from me. Why not take my soul as well?" Tarak shouted at the four walls.

The blade had just crafted a thin red line on his skin when a deep voice startled him.

"What you are looking for is on the table?" It said from behind him.

Tarak's eyes fell on a manuscript bound in worn leather, resting on the dining table.

"The contents of that book shouldn't concern you at this point. It is the product of a failed endeavour, the efforts of an inferior mind," it said.

Tarak did not dare to look back. He knew the instructions came from a ruinous place, where dark energies swirled, where time and space were not revered concepts. The man-thing speaking to him was the ruler of that eldritch domain birthed in the un-light of creation. The unholy being, the suzerain of unending terrors in this cold universe, only knew one language—the language of suffering.

"An improved authorial vision and a new medium for the translation.

This is what I ask of you," the voice commanded.

"Why?" Tarak asked in a faltering voice.

"Because you have proven to be pliable, Tarak. You are a vessel into which I can pour an unceasing torrent of pain and you will hold its divine essence like a loyal acolyte. You are worthy of this task; therefore, the task has chosen you," it responded.

Tarak remembered the old man on the bench in Dausa and his rambling monologue about the infernal, unfinished work. Gathering courage, Tarak pleaded, "Who are you?"

The entity laughed. It sounded like a decades old radio transmission.

The apartment transformed around Tarak. The brick and cement partitions of his dwelling became the walls of Bhangarh, complete with weeds growing out of crevices, blotches of mould, chipped and weathered surfaces, and patches of moss growing around tributaries of water damage.

Even the baying of the animals from the hills around the cursed fort seeped into the metamorphosised room.

"You will translate my play into your tongue so that a new generation of admirers can enjoy it," the being said. "Know that your son's sacrifice was a stepping stone to this great honour. Without the taste of his innocent soul, my tentacles wouldn't have perceived your existence and known your expertise."

"Vipul, Vipul," Tarak cried.

Above him, on the ceiling, a portal opened up and through that glowing firmament, he witnessed a gleaming city of malevolence.

The city in the visions. The city on the banks of the accursed lake. The city under the dark stars.

"O glorious Hades. O the waters of Hali," the voice said proudly. Tarak still hadn't gathered the courage to face the entity, so he looked around his unit, which now resembled one of the chambers he had searched in the haveli.

"What is this place?" Tarak asked.

The King in Yellow moved closer. The foul corpse breath of the diabolic creation assailed the translator's nostrils. Tarak felt the chill of its hands on his body.

The King whispered in his ears, "This abode of yours. This city you call home. Bhangarh. This mortal world. These will soon be vassals of Carcosa. Every time my play is read, I leach into this dimension. Do you understand, Tarak? You will be my new general in a war I have been waging for centuries."

Tarak watched on in muted horror as a figure in yellow tattered robes, wearing a crown carved from human bones and a pallid mask that oozed malice, stepped in front of him.

The King wrenched the knife free from Tarak's hand.

Then it bent and effortlessly dragged Saketh's corpse out from underneath the table.

The being skinned the dead body with practised strokes of the knife. Moist notes filled the air as skin was sliced off the flesh in large rectangular sections.

Tarak's eyelids began receding into the top and bottom of his eye cavity. He didn't need to blink anymore. It was an affront to the beautiful mystery unfolding before him.

For the first time since the disappearance of his son, a smile blossomed on Tarak's lips.

The King in Yellow completed his masterful butchery. The ruler of Carcosa collected the dermal offering in its open palms and extended it towards Tarak.

Tarak accepted the generous gift gratefully.

The darkest recesses of his soul sang, as a sense of belonging flooded its grief-scarred chambers. He was not lost anymore. He had gained a new purpose—a wondrous reason to live. Most relevantly, he accepted his lack of choice in the matter. Surrender was bliss.

Tarak laid the newly extracted skin on the table and looked at it adoringly.

It would make a great parchment for the King's vile song.

Such was his eagerness to delve into the immortal composition, Tarak didn't bother to get a pen. He opened up the veins in his forearm with the knife and dabbed his fingers with the fresh blood that jetted out the wound.

He uttered those dreadful words as he wrote them on what was once Saketh's outer garment.

"The King in Yellow. Act 1 Scene 1."

About the Author

Nikesh Murali has won the *Commonwealth Short Story Prize* (Asian region) and the *DWL Story Prize*, and also received honourable mentions for the *Katha Short Story Prize* twice.

Nikesh is the writer, narrator, and producer of India's most critically acclaimed storytelling podcast, *Indian Noir*, which has been featured in *Harper's Bazaar, India Today, The Hindu, The Times of India, The New Indian Express, The Hindustan Times, The Deccan Herald, The Statesman, The Week, The Telegraph, The Economic Times, Mid-Day*, and other media outlets. It has won rave reviews on major podcasting platforms from critics and listeners alike and is widely considered one of India's best horror and crime podcasts.

His popular audio-novel *His Night Begins*, which was praised by *Crime Fiction Lover* magazine for its 'terse action scenes and brutal energy', was released to critical acclaim and earned him the tag of the 'most hardboiled of Indian crime writers' from *World Literature Today Journal*.

Prepare to immerse yourself in the heart of darkness, as Nikesh Murali, *Commonwealth Short Story Prize* winning author and creator of India's most critically acclaimed horror podcast *Indian Noir*, weaves an unforgettable tapestry of bone-chilling scares and unrelenting terror.

Step into the shadows with this collection, where ordinary lives collide with the supernatural, exposing sinister forces that lurk beneath the surface.

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